

Ore no Isekai Shimai ga Jichou Shinai!

Arc 4 - Past feelings

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Prologue

Three months had now passed since the graduation turned festival.

Under the sunny summer sun, Milli, Alice, Claire, Sophia, and I decided to visit a small hill on the edge of Muhle.

The hill we are on is man-made and did not exist several years ago. There was a stone monument built on top and wildflowers were growing all around it.

It's the grave of all those killed during the attack on the Grances mansion.

Visiting this place is similar to the Bon Festival tradition in Japan. (TN: The Bon Festival is a Japanese Buddhist custom that involves honouring one's dead relatives)

It's not a custom in this world but now that the monument is finished, we hope to start a tradition of coming here every year.

I closed my eyes and knelt before the monument.

I want to pay respects to all of the knights that died for us that day. And for my family — rather, the people that were supposed to be my family.

Blake nii-san — To be honest, I didn't like him. He tried to do terrible things to Alice and would never accept me as his brother.

Even so, I never fully understood the position he was in. I was born and immediately became a threat to his position as heir to Father. It only made sense that he'd feel threatened and grow up to dislike me. That's why I hoped to reconcile with him someday....

Next, Caroline-san — I hardly knew anything about her.

We weren't related by blood and I only saw her face a few times. However, she was the main reason I was isolated for the first several years of my life. This didn't create a great first impression.

The only selfless thing I ever saw her do was to throw herself in front of a blade to save Father. Caroline-san certainly loved Father with all of her heart. It makes sense that she'd hate the child of a mistress.

And finally, my father, Robert.

Even to this day, I wonder what my father truly thought about me. Father listened to Caroline-san's request to isolate me, but then he treated me like a person when most avoided me...I never understood that.

But the final words I heard from Father before we fled the mansion was that he was proud of his son.

Were those his true feelings? Or did he tell me that because he knew his death was imminent?

I don't know.

And it's because I don't know that there are times when I can't help but think back to those days. I wonder what Father really thought of me....

I prayed for their souls with these feelings in my heart. After I finished praying, I backed away from the monument and went a little way down the hill.

Alice and Claire then approached the monument and began praying. As I watched them, Milli walked up to my side.

"You were praying for quite a while, weren't you?"

"You say praying but.... What did Father think of me?"

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"He loved you, Leon."

My mother answered my question without the slightest hesitation. With that much confidence, I'd like to believe her words, but I still feel like that may not be the case.

"But Father was the one that locked me away, right?"

"Don't you like to keep important things locked away?"

"I...I guess so."

If I were allowed to live in the mansion I'd be constantly tormented by Blake nii-san and harassed by Caroline-san. It would be impossible for Father to protect me from them in that situation.

But it's not like I know that's why he locked me away. For all I know, Father just didn't want to deal with the trouble of raising me in the mansion.

"Sorry for the wai— What's wrong?"

Alice had finished her prayers and came up to me while scratching her head.

"It's nothing. If everyone's finished, should we head home?"

— In the end, there's nothing I can do to find out how Father really felt about me. I have no choice but to accept that. With this thought in mind, our visit to the Grances family grave was finished.

Chapter 1: To Face The Past

A day after our visit to the grave, I had a somewhat strange dream about the past. It was back when Alice was still a slave and we were living apart.

“That was nostalgic....”

I was still half asleep as I buried my face in my body pillow.

Back then, I’d often ‘sleep’ with Alice in order to deceive Mary. It wasn’t even unusual for me to wake up and find myself using Alice as a body pillow.

I hadn’t yet hit puberty then and I never even felt nervous sleeping with Alice. Thinking back to those days now...I was doing something really amazing.

I’m really feeling nostalgic holding onto this body pillow.

Is it because I fell asleep holding this pillow that I had that nostalgic dream....eh? I-I don’t remember falling asleep holding a pillow.

— eh? No, no, no, no. There’s no way something like that would be happening. While thinking this, I slowly opened my eyes to see the ‘body pillow’ I had been holding in my arms was actually Alice.

“...why did I expect anything else?”

I looked at Alice’s sleeping face.

She had long eyelashes and thin eyebrows. I can’t see her eyes but I know they’re a deep blue that you could easily get lost in.

And her cherry blossom coloured hair was spread out all over the bed while shining brilliantly under the morning sun.

“Oi, it’s time to get up.”

I got a little angry seeing this and poked Alice on her cheek.

“...fwah? Ooh, Leon. Good morning~”

“Good morning.”

She didn’t even notice my finger poking her cheek. So I decided to take it a step further and mercilessly pinch her cheeks.

"Ouch, ouch, that hurts.... Mou, why are you getting so angry?"

"Isn't that obvious! Hair. Your hair. Why isn't your hair tied up while you're sleeping? You're going to damage it if you sleep with it like that."

"Oh...I came to wake you up and I must've fallen asleep.... But why would you be angry about that?"

"I'm not angry that you got into bed."

Because we're dating — I muttered this under my breath. I'm not angry. I guess I just want to take care of her.

"Ehe, ehehe~. Then, should I sleep with you every night?"

"Stop that. I'd never get any sleep if that happened."

"...Leon, you're so perverted."

"That's not what I meant. I just don't think I'd be able to sleep well if someone was sleeping next to me. You know that much, right? Why do you have to always tease me?"

I sighed and sat up in bed. Then I lifted Alice as she was trying to go back to sleep.

"You said you came to wake me up, but is there another reason?"

"Yes, actually. You've been acting strange the past few days and I was worried that something may be wrong."

"...hmm? Oh, it's nothing to worry about."

"Still, if something is on your mind, I want you to tell me about it."

"I think I've just become a little sentimental after visiting the grave."

"And that's why you've been acting strange?"

"Probably. Honestly, I didn't even notice myself."

I know the real reason, of course.

I may be over the grief I felt after losing my family but I still can't get over Father's final words. And I know there's nothing I can do about it.

That's why I lied to Alice. I don't want her worrying about me.

“...so your behaviour has nothing to do with the way Sophia’s been acting?”

“...Sophia has been acting strangely as well?”

“Yeah. I was thinking you were both worried about the same thing....”

“You don’t think it has anything to do with us dating, do you?”

The day I graduated from Muhle Academy, I confessed to Alice. I told Sophia and Claire the same day, so I was thinking Sophia didn’t take it well....

“I don’t think so. You told them both that you didn’t just choose me. You made sure that they knew you hadn’t abandoned them. I don’t think either of them has reason to be upset about that.”

“...well, that’s true.”

Having heard her say that, I really do sound like a womanizer.

No, it’s just that I wanted to go out with Alice, but I didn’t want to disregard their feelings either.

So why is Sophia acting strange?

The other reasons I can think of are: the mastermind behind the attack on the Grances family was Sophia’s father and Sophia killed her father.

“If Sophia is acting strange I bet it has something to do with our visit to the grave.”

This was my guess and Alice responded with a single word.

“Probably....”

“Hey, Alice.... Do you think Sophia is still affected by what happened in the past?”

“That’s.... I doubt those memories will ever disappear.”

I see. That’s certainly true. The normally innocent Sophia suddenly snapped and led to her causing blood to rain in her own home. I know I’ll never forget that day.

So I doubt Sophia will ever forget the events of that day.

“Thank you for letting me know. I think I’ll go speak with Sophia.”

“Okay, take care. Time to go to sleep for the third time today~”

“There’s nothing I can do to keep you from sleeping is there? At least tie up your hair before going back to sleep.”

I let out another sigh and left Alice to sleep in my bed while I went off to find Sophia.

I arrived at Sophia’s room and knocked on the door, hoping she wasn’t still asleep. Fortunately, she replied soon after.

“It’s me, Leon. Can I come in?”

“Leon onii-chan? That’s fine.”

I entered the room after receiving her permission and saw Sophia sitting by the window, elegantly drinking tea. Her soft blonde hair was reflecting the sun’s rays brilliantly.

She looked normal but her usual smile wasn’t there.

“Good morning~, Leon onii-chan. It’s rare for you to come see me in the morning. Is something wrong?”

“Alice told me that you’ve been acting strange recently. I was just worried about you.”

Perhaps she was reading my feelings. Even before I finished speaking, Sophia had averted her gaze.

“...it’s nothing.”

“I know you’re lying. There’s no way I’d believe nothing is wrong when you’re making a face like that. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but...I hope you know you can talk to me about anything.”

“...Leon onii-chan.”

Sophia looked unsure of what to do. I walked across the room to sit next to her and stroke her beautiful blonde hair.

At first, she didn’t move. She sat there with her eyes turned towards the window. But, before long, she turned back to me and leaned against me with her head against my chest.

“So, what’s wrong?”

“...actually, when we went to visit the grave, I overheard what you said to Milli. Since then, I’ve been thinking about my Mother and Father.”

“Carlos and Elyse?”

— so this day has finally come.

I’ve been expecting it ever since Sophia joined our family.

Sophia is convinced that her parents hated her. I think that’s a misunderstanding but I’ve never told Sophia that.

Because Sophia killed her father.

Of course, she had a good reason for doing that, but...Sophia has still been suffering from the guilt she felt over killing her father. In a very twisted way, what Carlos did was for Sophia. He truly cared about her — but I could never tell Sophia that.

But things are different now.

She’s overcome the traumas of her past and is trying to face the fears she’s had ever since that day.

“I never told you this, but...that day, Carlos was worried that I’d hurt you or try to kidnap you.”

“...father was?”

“Yes. That’s why I know he never hated you. He may have been scared of you in that final moment, but he didn’t hate you.”

“T-That’s right. Father didn’t dislike me. But, what I did to Father....”

Sophia started to tremble. I couldn’t stand seeing her like that so I pulled her delicate body close to mine to calm her down.

How long has she felt like this?

Sophia quietly pulled away and looked into my face.

“Hey, Leon onii-chan? Does that mean my mother felt the same way? Mother

doesn't hate me either, right?"

"I'm not sure I can answer that...."

I'm sure she must have loved Sophia as much as Carlos.

However, it's been five and a half years since that day.

Sophia killed Elyse's husband and would've killed her had I not stepped in. Since then, Elyse has been living in the very home in which this happened.

I can't imagine how Elyse feels now, but if this is what's causing Sophia to feel so anxious, and she believes she's ready to hear the answer to the question that's been bothering her....

"Would you like to return home to see Elyse?"

"That's...but...you'll come with, Leon onii-chan?"

"Of course."

If Sophia is ready to face her mother I will definitely go with her if she wants. I thought she'd be happy, but Sophia furrowed her brow.

"I'm happy that you'd be there for me, but.... Leon onii-chan...the things my mother did....."

She's one of the people responsible for my family's murder. Obviously, I don't think I'll ever be able to get over that.

However....

If Carlos had never done that, Claire and I would've been forced into our political marriages. Alice most likely would've been sold off and we wouldn't be living the lives we are now.

Whether they were good or bad, Carlos' actions led us to where we are today.

"...it may be time for me to face the past as well."

"Leon onii-chan?"

"I can't say that I'll ever forgive her. But that doesn't mean I can't face her. Let's face the Sfir home together."

To face the past in order to move forward.

Chapter 2: Deep Frustration

“Leon onii-chan...does that mean you’ll come with me?”

Sophia looked up at me with her deep red eyes. The way she’s anxiously grabbing onto my sleeve is really cute.

Obviously, there’s no way I can refuse her in this situation. I simply told her, “Of course.”

“...really?”

“Yes, really. We can make the time so all of us can go together.”

The moment I said this Sophia looked upset. It’s probably because I said all of us. I’ll just pretend like I didn’t notice.

...hmm, how should I put this? Seeing Sophia when she’s uneasy is nice, but when she’s upset she’s still cute. I want to see all of Sophia’s cute expressions.

The moment I thought this I could see Sophia’s crimson eyes shine brilliantly.

“I’ll forgive you if you sit next to me on the carriage ride there and back.”

“...umm, why are you saying that?”

“Leon onii-chan, have you forgotten about my ability?”

“Eh, no, I remember....”

Sophia has recovered since that day and her ability has returned to its previous level. That’s why she’s able to read my feelings by just being by my side.

But she’d usually never use her ability unnecessarily.

So why did she read my feelings without any reason....

“I try not to read people’s minds all the time. It’s just that you’re so hard to seduce.”

“What.....”

Is that it? Has she read my feelings before to help her seduce me?

"Yep, that's right."

Uwaaaa! How long has she been reading my mind!?

So that means — no, don't think anything! First off, since when has Sophia been able to read someone's feelings so clearly without even touching them?

"That's right.... I've been learning all about what you like in a woman, even if you like to think that you're hiding it. For example, recently with Alice onee-chan...."

Uwaaaaa! Wait, wait! This isn't good! Stop reading my feelings!

"Eh, but you were thinking about all the things you wanted to do...."

"I never thought that! No, sorry, I did think that, but I never spoke about it!"

"Eh? Then, would you like me to read Alice onee-chan's feelings and you can try again...?"

"You're too far gone at this point!"

Sophia's ability allows her to read the true feelings of someone's heart. She could even use it to read someone's movements in an instant — it's like she experiences their feelings and actions for herself.

It would be too dangerous for her to use that on Alice. It would be like trying to fit the contents of a thick book into a thin magazine.

"A-Anyway, you're too young to be thinking about stuff like that, Sophia."

"Muu...then, when will I be old enough?"

"Eh? Umm....j-just wait a little more...."

I decided to also accept both Sophia and Claire's feelings, not just Alice.

But it's not like I made that decision lightly. I care for Sophia and Claire just as much as I care for Alice. If it were anyone else my decision would've been different.

So, someday, if I also start dating both Sophia and Claire, I don't want it to just happen. I'd like to properly convey my feelings to each of them and for them to accept those feelings.

I thought this, and Sophia showed a sweet smile. Is she still reading my heart...?

Anyway, we decided to visit the Sfir mansion to go to Carlos' grave and speak with Elyse.

I left Sophia's room and was trying to decide who to take with. That's why I'm now at Claire's office.

"Claire? It's Leon, can I come in?"

"Otouto-kun? Of course you can come in."

"...really? You're not changing clothes?"

I remembered in the past she told me to enter even though she was changing clothes.

"It's really okay, I'm not changing. Please, enter."

"Really? I'll be angry if I open the door and you're in your underwear."

I was afraid as I opened the door. I looked around the room and eventually came across Claire's desk. She was sitting at her desk, twirling her finger through her platinum blonde hair.

"...otouto-kun, what kind of person do you think I am?"

"Don't make me look like the bad guy. You told me to come in before when you were changing."

"But I told you that I was changing before you came in, right? Why do you think I have to change clothes in my office in the first place?"

She did tell me before asking me to come in, but...it's still suspicious.

"So, what did you need? And how does it involve Alice?"

"I just needed to ask you about something. It doesn't involve Alice."

"Fu~n, that's unusual."

"Guh-!"

She's as tough as ever.... But I guess that's understandable. Claire confessed

to me before Alice but I've never given her a proper response.

Even so, I didn't think she'd be angry.

"Claire, you know –"

"Sorry, I was just kidding."

The words I wanted to say were cut short by Claire's interruption.

"...Claire?"

"I want you to see me the same way you see Alice, but I have no problem with you being so close to her. I was just playing around."

"Is.... Is that so?"

"It is. So stop making such a serious face. In the first place, I was the one that gave you Alice as a gift."

"...that's true."

I don't know if Claire's words are her true feelings or if she's just trying to make me not worry about her. But I think it would be better if I don't say anything more just yet. For now, I'll believe her and move past that topic.

"So, why did you come to see me?"

"Oh, right. Sophia wants to see Elyse."

"...Sophia does?"

"I wanted to know why she was acting so strangely, so when I went to see her in her room, she told me she wanted to go back to the Sfir mansion."

"...otouto-kun, are you serious?"

Claire's jade eyes were filled with anxiety as she stared back at me. She doesn't even have to say why. She's worried about Sophia.

"I think you're making it seem worse than it actually is."

"How so? If Sophia goes there to meet with Elyse, what are the chances that Elyse will tell her that she and Carlos loved Sophia? I feel like it's more likely to be the opposite."

"That may be, but you could just as easily be wrong. I can understand her desire, and if I still had the chance, I'd want to know as well."

"...what does that mean?"

I truly believe that I want to do whatever I can to help Sophia move past that painful moment in her life. My own desire to know what Father thought of me may have a bigger influence on me than even I know. But Claire isn't able to understand my meaning.

"I feel the same way as her. I wonder what Father thought of me. Did he love me or was I nothing more than a nuisance to him –"

"You think he hated you?"

"–that's the problem. I don't know how he truly felt."

"...well, you can think whatever you want, but there's no way to know for sure."

"Yeah. That's the most painful part."

If he hated me, it would be better to just give up. If he loved me, I'd like to persevere with that feeling in my heart. But I don't know.

Should I cherish his memory, or should I resent him for everything that happened early on in my life? I don't know the answer.

"I can never know, but Sophia can still find her answer. I would never force her to do it if she didn't want to, but if she wishes to know, then I'll do everything I can to help her."

"...I understand. If you've thought about it this much, I won't stop you. I'll let Sophia meet with Elyse."

Chapter 3: Another Request from the Marquis of Gramp

As a result of our discussion, it was decided that Sophia would be returning to her home next week.

There didn't appear to be any issues with us visiting her family home, but Crane contacted me and wished to meet, so I decided to take care of that first.

So, on a certain day in the afternoon, Crane visited the mansion.

"Hey, Leon. I see you're still surrounded by beautiful girls."

"...I think one of them is here because of you."

We were sitting across from each other in the drawing room of the mansion. I sat on one side with Claire and Liz on either side of me. Tina stood behind us.

Claire is obviously here because she's the acting earl, Tina is here because she's Claire's assistant, and Liz is here because she's the princess of this country and she has collaborated with Crane before.

"Marquis of Gramp, thank you for your previous assistance."

Liz's bluish silver hair bounced slightly as she lowered her head. She looks just like a princess despite her clumsy personality.

"It was no problem. Taking care of the royal family is also a responsibility of the nobility."

Crane answered with a casual tone, but...that was a lie. He only helped her because he knew it wouldn't impact him or his family negatively.

"So, Crane, you're here about something concerning Patrick."

The matter of Patrick's involvement in the attack in the forest has yet to be resolved.

Our investigation into that attack led to us believing Patrick may be behind it.

...eh? Does Crane know Liz was acting as an escort during that attack? We never told anyone and it was never written in any of the reports about the

attack.

If that ultra siscon Albert were to find out about that, I'm sure I'd be executed.

"Yes. I actually have a request as well, but...Patrick is the main reason I'm here."

I feel like he just glossed over something important, but Crane continued before I could ask about it.

"We investigated further into the matter, but, as of now, we have no hard evidence that proves Patrick was behind the attack."

"Is that so...well, I expected as much."

There's no way to collect fingerprints in this world and there are no cameras or pictures. I never expected they'd be able to prove anything with just a brief description of the man that hired those bandits.

"However, if Patrick were to ever show his face in your territory, all knights and soldiers in every town have been given orders to capture him."

"...if he enters our territory?"

I wasn't quite sure why he said that and curiously tilted my head.

"The promise you made? He is never to step a foot in your territory again. Don't tell me you've forgotten."

"Of course not. I was just doubting he'd be stupid enough to show his face."

That was a lie. I actually completely forgot. I did my best to cover it up but I could tell Crane saw straight through me.

"...it's okay if you forgot. I just want you to take care of yourself. There's a chance he's died already or just given up on the idea of revenge, but there's still the chance that he's just waiting for the right moment."

"You don't need to worry. I've already been at work increasing the security of the school and the city."

"None of that would make a difference if he were to attack you directly."

"...you think he might be planning to attack me directly? I've already proven

to him that he wouldn't be able to beat me one-on-one."

"It's entirely possible. And that's why...I'm worried about you."

Crane muttered his last few words while turning away from me. As I was thinking he was acting like a tsundere, Claire wrapped her arms around my arm.

"Wait a minute, Marquis of Gramp! Otouto-kun is ours, don't even think about trying to steal him!"

"It's just like she said, Marquis of Gramp! You need our approval before you can start trying to seduce him!"

Following Claire's lead, Liz clung to my other arm. Crane began to laugh after hearing the ridiculous things they were saying.

I could see his eyes telling me he understood how hard it must be for me.

"Haha, don't worry. I'm only interested in young girls with large chests."

"If that's the case –"

"There's no problem."

Having been convinced, Claire and Liz moved away from me.

— no, no, no, how is that okay!? They don't have any follow-up questions!? Crane is going to be thirty-five this year. No matter what world we're in, it's a criminal offence for him to be chasing after young girls. Eh?

Actually, I guess that is legal in this world.

I've been living in this world for sixteen years.

I may have gotten used to the common sense of this world but I don't think I'll ever get used to the fact that it's okay for a girl that's in her early teens to marry a man twenty years her senior.

"Well, that's everything I had to tell you concerning Patrick. Don't worry though, I'll handle all of the more annoying tasks that need to be taken care of involving him."

"I'm sorry for making you take care of everything."

"No need to worry. You and I are friends after all."

“...thank you...very much?”

I could sense something bad coming and was actually unsure if I should even thank him. And, just as expected, Crane showed a broad smile.

“On a side note, I actually have a request for you, will you hear me out? Why am I even asking? We’re friends after all.”

...just as expected.

“I’ll listen, as long as it’s something I can do.... What kind of troubles are you having now?”

“It’s nothing too troublesome. I created a school and an Adventurer’s Guild just like you recommended, and I was hoping you’d be able to come visit.”

“You want me to visit...?”

By the way, the Adventurer’s Guild is a central hub for people to post requests to subjugate monsters, collect materials, or hire escorts.

However, there really aren’t many monsters on this continent.

So they primarily escort merchants or gather medicinal herbs or other materials. They’re basically like like hunters or guards, but there wasn’t a centralized organization for them, so I recommended we establish one in several cities.

The school is set up in the same way as Muhle Academy.

So his request is for me to visit the now completed Guild and Academy.... Last time, he had a simple request of just accepting one additional student.

There’s no way it’s just a visit.

“...what are you plotting now?”

“What kind of reputation must I have if you immediately assume I’m planning something? Well, you’re not too far off. I just want you, specifically, to come and make sure everything is setup correctly.”

If he just wants someone to come and inspect the school, there are plenty of other qualified people he could ask. So why does he want me specifically?

"I don't mind coming to visit, but why do you need it to be me?"

"Well, it actually has to do with Owen."

He spoke as if it was a given that I'd know this person.

When I was about to tell him I didn't know that person, Tina spoke from behind me and said that Owen is the head and marquis of the Full-Flat family, a supporter and ally of the Gramp family.

"What does this have to do with the Marquis of Full-Flat?"

"He's been an ally of mine for a long time. When he last came to visit me, do you know what he told me?"

Even if he asks me, I can't tell him something I don't know. I could just guess, but I'd rather just get straight to the point.

"That guy, Owen, once he found out that you became friends with Crown Prince Alberto, he became worried that he and his family would be overlooked and eventually fall apart."

I was finally able to understand and let out a sigh.

"...I could understand his worries, but you know that won't happen. I'll come visit and clear up his misunderstanding."

"Thank you for understanding. You can use this visit to give our school and Guild a proper inspection as well."

It's just as I expected and all I can do is sigh.

But, I really don't have much choice but to visit. The Marquis of Gramp is a necessary ally to us. I'd be in trouble if a rumour started spreading that he was unhappy with me.

"I don't mind visiting, but...is it entirely necessary? If you were to make it clear that we have a good relationship, that should help alleviate his concerns, right?"

"I actually tried to do that once already but he took it the wrong way. He was quite agitated after that."

"Is that so...."

Could it be that?

Is this guy feeling jealous of the relationship between myself and Crane? It's kind of a ridiculous for someone in the position of marquis to be feeling this. However, it's also quite terrifying considering the power he wields.

However, as I said earlier, it would be bad if rumours of Crane's unhappiness were to spread. So, after travelling to the Sfir home, I'll visit the Marquis of Gramp.

Chapter 4: Carlos' Grave

I'd estimate that there are about thirty kilometres between the Sfir mansion and our home in Muhle. Previously, it would've taken us three hours to travel this distance, but with the upgraded carriage and highway system, it now only takes us two hours.

It was now a couple of days after Crane's visit. Sofia, Claire, Alice, and I were all riding together to the Sfir mansion.

By the way, Liz was left in the city of Muhle.

She said this to me before we left,

"You're terrible for forcing me to be the only one to stay behind, onii-sama!"

However, Liz still has her job of freezing and cooling perishables and it would be a difficult time for her to leave considering it's the summer.

...that's not to say we plan on relying on Liz forever. We'd obviously be in trouble if she were to decide to go home or if she ever gets sick.

Currently, we're improving the insulated box and the freezer. We're also proceeding with plans to position mages at each relay point.

With just a little more effort, Liz will have more time for herself.

Anyway, we arrived at the Sfir mansion for the first time in a while. Sophia's older brother, Eric, who had become Earl after Carlos' death, greeted us.

"I'm glad to see you've all arrived in good health. As the head of the Sfir family, I welcome you to my home. Sophia, you've grown a lot since we last saw each other."

"Eric onii-chan, it's been a while."

Sophia ran forward and hugged Eric and he embraced her back.

I think they were close in the past, but now that Sophia has overcome her trauma, it seems that they're able to rebuild their relationship.

"

— *What is this feeling? Seeing how close those two are, it's causing my chest to hurt. Sophia is my sister-in-law....*”

I heard someone muttering this behind me. When I turned around, I could see Alice laughing.

“...oi, don’t just start monologuing behind me like that.”

“I’m just giving voice to your true feelings.”

“You’re wrong. I’m not jealous of Sophia’s real brother.”

“Are you perhaps jealous that Sophia gets to hug Eric?”

“....”

No comment.

I didn’t even respond to her question — as I turned away and headed over to Eric, I could hear her laughing behind me.

“Hey, Leon. You look well.”

“I’m glad to see you looking so healthy too. I saw it on the way here, but the Sfir territory seems to be developing well.”

“It’s thanks to the students you sent from your school. Because of them, the situation within our territory has vastly improved.

“Is that so? I’m happy to have been of service to you.”

Actually — well, rather obviously — due to the Sfir territory being located next to the Grances territory, they were also heavily impacted by the flu and famine.

And if the Sfir home were to collapse, we’d no longer receive reparations from them. For that reason, we continued to support the Sfir family.

“I can’t thank you enough, Leon.”

“It wasn’t exactly selfless, so there’s really no need to thank me. I’m sure you were informed of this before our arrival, but the reason we’re visiting today....”

“You wished to visit my father’s grave and...to speak with Mother.”

He hesitated when bringing up Elyse.

“Do you think that’s a bad idea?”

“That’s right.... To be honest, I’m against that idea. However, if Sophia wishes to see her...I’ll allow it.”

Eric also seems conflicted. Just like Claire, he’s unsure of whether this is a good idea.

“I understand your worries, but Sophia and I are both trying to face the past. If possible, I’d also like to speak with her.”

“...I understand, but it will take some time to prepare for the visit. I’d suggest visiting the grave beforehand.”

“All right.... Sophia, let’s visit the grave first. Will everyone else be coming as well?”

“Wait just a moment. Can you lend me Claire for a while?”

“Claire?”

I don’t mind but why would he need her. And I turned to Claire.

“You have business with me?”

“Yeah. I’d like to discuss future policies with you....”

“Okay...ah, is it about cleansing farmland in your territory? All right, I don’t mind. Otouto-kun, I’ll discuss things with Eric, you go on ahead.”

“Okay.”

So Sophia, Alice, and I left to visit the grave.

We travelled to a deserted corner of the Sfir home. It was a rather lonely area, a place not at all fitting for the grave of the former head of the family.

This is only my guess, but...they’ve probably done this after considering how we would feel.

To the average citizen, Carlos was the saviour of the Grances family that gave his own life to protect us. However, in reality, he was a murderer that killed my family.

Sophia knelt down at the foot of the grave and sat there silently with her eyes

closed. Alice and I watched her from a little ways away.

I'm trying to imagine what she's thinking now.

Sophia killed her father and his subordinate Regis.

Carlos and Regis both committed crimes worthy of being put to their deaths, but Sophia's feelings were amplified by my own when she used her ability on me. Without this, Sophia wouldn't have killed them.

Sophia didn't kill her father and Regis of her own volition. She was pushed forward by my own hatred of Regis and Carlos.

"...Leon, what are you thinking about?"

Alice's words were barely audible.

"Nothing –"

I was only able to speak a single word before Alice placed her finger over my lips.

"Do you really think you can show me such a painful face and try to tell me nothing's wrong?"

She saw straight through me.

"I was just thinking that if I knew how Sophia's ability worked back then, I could've stopped her from reading my feelings and this never would've happened."

"...well, if you think about it like that, then I guess it is your fault."

Alice giggled as she said the exact opposite of what I wanted to hear.

"You're right. It's all my fault."

"Yep. The fact that Sophia killed her father, was able to overcome that trauma, and was freed from her marriage to Patrick was entirely your fault."

I was unsure of how to react after hearing her words.

"Sophia got over her trauma because you and everyone else were there for her. Even with Patrick, that was a result of you and Claire working together."

"Then, I could be just as much to blame for not noticing the full extent of Sophia's abilities. I was also there that day."

"That's...."

I wanted to tell her she was wrong, but Alice was in the same position as me that day. If I want to blame myself, then I'd also have to blame her.

...I understand what she's trying to say. If I try to blame myself, then she'll blame herself as well.

"Alice, you're kind, but also not at the same time."

"That's awfully rude. I'm a kind person, I'm just not that sweet."

"...well, thank you for trying to make me feel better."

Although she went about it in a roundabout way, she did manage to make me feel a little better. After that, we watched Sophia as she finished her prayer.

Shortly after, Sophia stood up and ran over to me before jumping into my arms.

"...did you finish your prayer?"

"Yeah. I can't forgive him for what he did. However...he is the person that raised me. So I wanted to make sure he knew I was thankful to him for that."

"I see...."

I was relieved to see that Sophia seemed to be truly over her past.

With that thought in my mind, I gently patted Sophia's fluffy gold hair. The slight smell of citrus was coming from her hair and lightly tickled my nose.

Sophia will be thirteen years old this year. It really is getting embarrassing for her to be embracing me like this.

"...why?"

Because people in this world mature at such a young age, and Sophia's chest, in particular, is developing exceptionally well....

"...u-umm, Sophia?"

"I'm not reading your feelings."

“...is that so?”

It seems that no matter how much I try to act like a nice guy on the surface, it's all pointless when Sophia can read my inner feelings.

Even though she read my feelings, she never pulled away from me.

“I like it when Leon onii-chan thinks about things like that.”

“Ah~ fine, I get it. I don't know why I ever expect any of you to show any self-restraint.”

I was at my limit of embarrassment and had to peel Sophia off of me. At the same time, I glanced over at Alice to see her laughing at my embarrassment.

“...what is it?”

“Nothing. It's just...I'm glad that we didn't need to be so worried about Sophia.”

“...that may be true.”

Sophia has certainly become stronger. If the Sophia I first met was in this same situation, I doubt she'd ever be able to forgive her father or she'd never stop blaming herself.

So I'm relieved that she was able to get past this first hurdle.

However, until she meets with Elyse, I can't say that I'm no longer worried about her.

Everything depends on how Elyse will react to meeting with Sophia.

Chapter 5: Mother's Feelings

After finishing our visit to the grave, we returned to Eric.

Claire and Eric still seemed to be in a serious discussion about the matters they mentioned earlier.

“— why? I’m looking at two of my close friends, but for some reason, my chest hurts. Claire is my sister....”

“Stop it.”

I gave Alice a light tap on the forehead after hearing another one of her bizarre monologues. It’s not like I’m a siscon that’s jealous of seeing his sister speaking with another guy.

...but I am a brother that’s starting to see his sister as a woman.

“Otouto-kun, you’re back already.”

Claire cast a fleeting look over Sophia. When she saw Sophia looked happy and energetic, relief swept across her face.

“I’m back, Claire. Are you still speaking with Eric?”

“Yeah. It seems like a pretty big opportunity, so we need to talk things over carefully. Actually, I was wondering if I could consult with Alice.”

“Oh, sure.”

The main reason we came here, was to visit Carlos’ grave and to speak with Elyse. However, Alice and Claire – especially, Claire – wouldn’t want to see Elyse.

This should be obvious but Elyse played a large role in murdering our parents.

We decided we’d leave Alice with Claire in the drawing room while Sophia and I will go visit Elyse.

Somehow, our group is about to split up. If this were a horror movie, now would be the time bad things start to happen.

...there’s no way something like that will happen in this mansion.

“Eric, is everything ready for our visit?”

“Yes, everything’s ready. My mother isn’t staying in the main house so I’ll have a maid guide you to her.”

The maid was ready for us to follow her, but Sophia stopped to speak with Eric before leaving.

“Eric onii-chan, how is Mother doing?”

“...it’s hard for me to say, but...I’m hoping you’re meeting with her will end well. It would be best for you to see her for yourself.”

“...I understand, Eric onii-chan.”

Sophia spun around on her heel before hooking her arm through mine.

“Well then, let’s get going.”

Her golden hair shook side-to-side as she began walking forward while pulling me.

I looked down at her face and was surprised to see she didn’t look anxious. I was still concerned about her interaction with Eric.

“What was that with Eric?”

“...what do you mean?”

“Did you use your ability to read his feelings?”

“No, I didn’t. I told you before, I only use my ability when I really feel it’s necessary.”

“...I see.”

Isn’t that a good thing? I mean, it certainly is beneficial to read someone’s feelings. It would make it a lot easier to avoid a tragic event. But at the same time, in this situation, it’s best for her to go into this without knowing anything.

Now then, stop reading my feelings — after thinking this, we followed after the maid.

We left the Sfir mansion. In the distance, there was a smaller house. I felt nostalgic seeing this as the house was a similar distance between my childhood

home and the Grances mansion.

We stepped through the doorway and entered a corridor in the building.

Even though she's being confined here, there was no sign of any guards inside the house. There was a single guard standing at the entrance but that was it.

Shortly after entering, we walked down to the end of the corridor and were met with a single door.

"This is Elyse-sama's room. I will be waiting at the entrance. Come find me when you've finished speaking with her."

"Thank you."

"Please, take your time."

The maid said this and bowed before walking back down the corridor. I watched her leave before turning my attention to Sophia. She was starting to look nervous again. I gently stroked her head in the hopes of calming her down.

"...Leon onii-chan?"

"I'll go in first. After that, you can come in."

"...thank you, Leon onii-chan."

Sophia grabbed onto the hem of my shirt as I knocked on the door three times. After a brief pause, I could hear a faint voice telling me to enter.

"Excuse me."

I opened the door and took one step inside. Elyse's room was large and extravagant. A single couch sat next to a nearby window but Elyse was nowhere to be seen.

I turned my attention to the large bed in the centre of the room. Beneath the bed's canopy, I could see Elyse's figure lying beneath the sheets. I'm not sure if this is due to her confinement, but she looked unwell.

"Impossible. I never expected you to come and see me. What business could you possibly have with me?"

The moment she noticed me, the aloof atmosphere surrounding her changed to that of disdain.

"It's been a while. About five years have passed since then."

"...I asked you what business you have with me. Or have you come here to mock and ridicule me?"

"I have no intention of doing that, but...why would you think I would?"

"I've heard all about the great accomplishments of the Grances family."

...oh, I think I understand. The reason things ended like this is that Carlos and Elyse never believed what I told them all those years ago. If she knows how my family is currently doing, it's understandable that she'd expect me to laugh at her.

"I still think it's regrettable that you didn't believe me back then. However, I'm sure to you I appeared to be nothing more than a child trying to find a way out of a horrible living situation. But I have no desire to mock you."

"...then why are you even here?"

"I didn't come alone."

After saying this, I looked back at Sophia. Sophia nodded and walked up beside me. After seeing her, Elyse's eyes opened wide in shock.

"Sophia...what are you doing here? Leon, why would you bring my daughter to see me in this state!?"

Elyse became irate believing that I had forced Sophia to come here to hurt the both of them even more.

"I didn't bring her here."

"Don't be stupid! Sophia would never want to meet with me!"

"– he's not lying. I asked Leon onii-chan to take me to see you."

"What did you just say...?"

Elyse fell silent as she stared at Sophia.

What could she be feeling at this moment? There appeared to be so many emotions floating across her pale face that it was impossible for me to tell.

"...Leon, please take that girl and leave immediately."

"What are you talking about? Sophia came here just to see you."

"Don't you understand? I can't have my daughter reading my feelings right now!"

Is she...trying to say she really does hate Sophia?

I can't know.

Or at least, I can't tell how she feels just by reading the complex expression on her face.

If Elyse really does hate Sophia — if Sophia will get nothing but pain out of meeting Elyse — I might have to take Sophia and leave.

I thought this, but —

"It's fine, Mother. I haven't been able to use my ability since that day."

As I stood there perplexed, Sophia lied to her mother.

I don't know if she plans on using her benefits secretly or if she'll refrain from using them, but...either way, Sophia doesn't want to leave.

...well, we came so far just to see her. I'll allow this to continue as long as Sophia wishes.

"Is that true? Are you really no longer able to use your ability?"

"Yes. I've been too scared to read anyone's feelings since then."

"I..see.... *cough cough*"

Elyse let out a few dry coughs.

"...Mother?"

"It's *cough* nothing."

Another deep cough. Elyse said it was nothing but that's clearly not true. At first, I thought it might just be due to the surprise she felt after seeing Sophia, but...is she actually sick?

And it seems like I'm not the only one that thought this. Sophia looked worried about her mother but Elyse didn't say anything else.

"Why have you come to see me, Sophia?"

"That's, umm...I've come to visit, Mother."

"I know that much, but why are you here?"

"Umm...I thought it would be nice if we could make up...."

Despite faltering slightly, Sophia was able to tell her mother the truth. I sincerely hope that this will turn out well for her.

But after hearing her words, Elyse looked displeased.

"...Sophia, what you're saying is ridiculous. You want to be with Leon even though your father and I are the people that killed his family."

"I know that."

"No, you clearly don't. The grudge one feels against the person that killed their loved one won't disappear easily. Carlos and I killed his family –"

"– Elyse."

Sophia was beginning to tremble and I couldn't stop myself from speaking up. Elyse just gave me a sharp look before returning to Sophia.

"Sophia, you'll be turning thirteen this year. You're already a wonderful young lady. By trying to remain a part of the Sfir family, you're greatly disrespecting Leon."

"But...Mother...."

"Go home. You're no longer a member of the Sfir family."

"Mother...."

Sophia called out to her mother again, but Elyse ignored her and returned to her original position on the bed.

Sophia silently stared at her Mother before turning back to face me and grabbing onto my sleeve.

"Let's go, Leon onii-chan."

"...are you sure?"

Sophia only gave me a slight nod in response. I don't think this is really what

she wants, but...I think this is enough for today. I turned around and walked out of the room with Sophia following closely behind.

But, just as I thought, Sophia was still worried about her mother. As I was closing the door, Sophia looked back one more time at Elyse.

"Mother.... I really can't forgive her for killing your family."

"...if that's how you feel, don't worry about me. She's your mother."

"No, I won't forgive her. I can't forgive her. She is my mother, and I'm grateful to her for giving birth to me but that's all.... Thank you for raising me...."

She was on the verge of crying as she gave one last look at the door before turning around to leave.

Chapter 6: One of the Rarest Materials in the World

Not long after we had left Elyse's room, Sophia was still doing her best to hold back her tears.

Considering what just happened with her mother, that's understandable. But that is also why I can't let Sophia stay like this.

If we return to the others like this, they'll be worried about her. That's why I need to calm her down before we go back.

I grabbed hold of Sophia's hand and walked down the corridor.

I spoke with the maid who was waiting at the entrance and she allowed us to take a short break in the dining room. I asked the maid to get us a drink and did my best to comfort Sophia by gently stroking her head.

"Sophia, you don't need to feel so bad."

"But...Leon onii-chan...."

"You weren't able to make up this time, but you can still try again."

"But she doesn't want me to come back. She told me I'm not even a member of the Sfir family anymore."

"That's true.... I'm sure what she said was hard for you to hear, but she was worried about you. That's why, even though she said those things, I don't think she hates you."

This is just my own assumption but I think that Elyse trying to keep Sophia away is different than Elyse hating Sophia.

She even said it was disrespectful of Sophia to try to make up with her. In other words, she was telling Sophia to value me more than her.

Of course, I could be completely wrong as well.

"Or did you read her feelings?"

I thought this may be the case, but Sophia shook her head.

"I told Mother that I couldn't use it and I didn't want to deceive her."

"I see...."

It may have been better if she had used it, but...I can understand the feeling of not wanting to lie to your family. Besides, if she were to lie in order to reconcile with her mother, she'd have a guilty conscience right from the start of their new relationship.

This time, for sure, it was better that she didn't use her ability.

Nevertheless, if she can't use her ability...where do we go from here? Of course, I don't plan on giving up. It's just I'm not sure how to proceed without her ability.

While I was thinking about this, Eric entered the dining room. Claire and Alice followed shortly after him.

"Eric, have you finished your discussion?"

"Yeah, it went well. As for you...was it that bad?"

"She wants Sophia to forget about her and focus on her new family."

"Just as I thought...."

"Elyse didn't appear to be doing well...."

"That's...."

Eric seemed unwilling to answer. But after Sophia, Alice, and Claire turned to hear his answer, he knew he had to respond.

"Honestly...she's suffering from a severe illness. I can't know for sure but it seems like she'll never recover."

"That — that has to be a lie...right?"

Sophia stood up and charged up to Eric. But as she saw Eric slowly shake his head, all of the energy left her body and she collapsed to the ground.

"Sophia-chan."

Claire crouched down next to her and embraced her limp body.

I also tried to run up to her side, but Claire gave me a look that told me she could handle this.

I think she's trying to tell me that I should speak with Eric. I gave Claire a slight nod and turned my focus to him.

"What are the symptoms of her disease? Alice and I have some knowledge of disease so we may be able to help."

It's been nearly ten years since the influenza outbreak. I haven't learned much about medicine since then, but Alice has increased her knowledge about the medicine of this world. This, combined with the knowledge from her previous life, may even make penicillin possible to make.

However, we have yet to make it and penicillin isn't effective against all types of diseases.

Both Alice and I, and the rest of our family, suffered from an incurable disease in our previous lives. Though, I doubt Elyse is suffering from a disease that unique. If there's a way we can help I want to do it.

Definitely —

"The disease is called...I believe it is...tuberculosis —"

A cold sweat ran down my neck.

A severe illness that can easily be spread through the air by coughing or sneezing.

More importantly, a disease that penicillin won't be able to cure.

We'll need to quarantine Elyse.

However,

"Umm...the full name is Tuberculosis Magical Power Conversion Inhibitor."

Eric's continuation just confused me.

"Tuberculosis...Magical Power Conversion Inhibitor...what is that? Isn't it just an infectious disease?"

"Infectious? I'm not sure what that is. It's been almost four years since my mother contracted the disease and I've never heard that term from any caretaker or doctor."

"Is that so...."

Even though tuberculosis is an infectious disease, someone that becomes infected with it may show no symptoms for quite some time, but...would it really take more than two years for symptoms to appear? And if it hasn't spread to anyone, is this tuberculosis completely unrelated to the original disease?

"Umm...so what kind of disease is it exactly?"

"I don't know anything specific about it, but I had a doctor describe it to me. It decreases the ability of the body to convert magical power into mana. As time goes on, the dormant mana in the body gradually decreases."

"Their mana decreases...?"

I glanced over to Alice to confirm that such a disease actually exists.

"I've never heard of this exact disease, but if the mana in your body is unable to replenish naturally, your body will slowly fall apart."

"I see..."

If Alice believes so then this disease must be real. Now the problem becomes...and I glanced over at Eric.

"Excuse me, can that doctor be trusted?"

"Of course. That doctor has served my family for years and my father placed great trust in them. Besides that...after we lost Father, this doctor stayed with my mother and supported her until she was able to live on her own."

I see. If it's a doctor that his family has trusted for years, the likelihood that the doctor is trying to extort money out of them is low.

So this disease isn't infectious like the tuberculosis I know, which is good because we won't have to worry about a pandemic. It's surprising for a fantasy disease to have the same name as one from Earth.

If the objective is to cure a fantasy disease, then the obvious choice would be white magic. But those that can use recovery magic are rare on this continent.

Actually, although white magic can heal wounds, it doesn't appear capable of curing diseases.

These are just Alice's words, but white magic appears to activate and somehow supercharge the cells, accelerating the healing of a wound. However, this would have a negative impact on a virus and lead to the disease developing at an accelerated rate.

In other words, we can't rely on magic here. We need to find another way....

"Is there nothing that can be done? If this disease decreases the body's natural magical power conversion rate, couldn't Elyse just train herself to consciously convert magical power into mana?"

"That seems impossible as well. The doctor told me that the disease not only affects the body's ability to naturally convert magical power but also reduces its ability to convert magical power by other means. For the time being, the doctors have developed a medicine to keep her from growing any worse."

"So...they can maintain her current state but they can't cure her?"

"Yes, well...the cure for her illness does actually exist."

"Then why — !"

My words were quickly cut off by Eric.

"The cure does exist but some of the ingredients are incredibly rare."

"They're incredibly rare? What exactly are they?"

"First off, we'll need the liver of the Lyk Skull Bear and the claws of an Earth Dragon. These ingredients alone are rare but not impossible to find. It's the final ingredient that I think will be impossible to obtain."

Eric had clearly given up on creating the cure.

The Sfir family is the same rank as our family. Their power may have declined over the past few years, but they've begun to rebuild and are slowly starting to regain their lost power.

A material that the Sfir family can't obtain must be unbelievably rare.

But they can't save Elyse without it. If they can't save Elyse, Sophia will become increasingly sad. So, even if it's difficult to obtain, I want to do it.

With this determination in my heart, I asked for the name of the rare

ingredient.

"A material that is said to be the rarest in the world — a leaf from The World Tree."

It was a name that I had actually heard somewhere before. I looked at Eric in disbelief.

Eric mistook this reaction for despair and looked apologetic.

"I'm sorry that there's nothing you can do, but I'm sure you can understand why this cure is impossible to create."

"No, there shouldn't be any problems."

"...what are you talking about? It's a leaf from The World Tree. Even if you have connections with the Elf tribe, I've heard it's impossible to obtain. It's the rarest material on the planet."

I looked over at Alice to see her sticking her tongue out at me. Alice's lack of self-restraint was showcased once more, but this time it would save Elyse's life.

Eric seemed to be able to figure out what I meant based off of our interaction.

"No way. She can get it?"

"It's possible.... She actually planted a World Tree behind our school."

"...huh?"

"If we go to the academy, we'll have all the leaves we could possibly need."

Eric looked as if he may pass out.

Chapter 7: Lasers, Again

A few days had now passed since we returned from the Sfir mansion. I was spending time resting my feet in the foot bath in the mansion when someone hugged me from behind. I could feel her small body and ample chest pressing against my back.

It was clearly Sophia hugging me but, as usual, I said, “Who is it?” But today there was no response.

“...Sophia? What’s wrong?”

“Thank you, Leon onii-chan.”

“Hmm? What’s this about?”

“Thank you for trying to help my mother.”

“Oh, it’s about that. You don’t need to thank me.”

I never want to see that sad expression on Sophia’s face again. And in order to make sure that never happens again, I decided to use the power of the Grances family to gather the ingredients needed to cure Elyse.

Eric abandoned the idea of creating the cure because he believed the leaves of The World Tree would be impossible to obtain. Now that those leaves are easily obtainable, there’s no reason not to try to create the cure. Even if the person the cure is for played a part in the murder of my family, I want to help.

In order to create the medicine we still needed the liver of the Lyk Skull Bear and the claws of an Earth Dragon.

“Leon onii-chan?”

“Yeah?”

“...I love you.”

“I know.”

I gently stroked Sophia’s arms as she continued to hug me. Then, she started to moan, “Muu~ muu~ muuu~”

“What is it?”

“Shouldn’t you say something else?”

“I refuse.”

“That’s not fair, onii-chan.”

Sophia’s also cute when she sulks. She gently squeezed my neck from behind but it felt more like she was hugging my entire body.

And it was as she was embracing me that Claire saw us.

“Oh, just as I expected, you’re both here. Are you feeling better now?”

“I’m better but what’s wrong?”

“I wanted you to take part in the opening ceremony.”

“The opening ceremony...for what?”

“The facility I’ve been supervising the construction of has finally been finished.”

“That’s good but...when will this be? We’re trying to find the ingredients right now, and once we have, I’ll need to spend all my time focusing on that.”

“Ah, that shouldn’t be a problem because it’s right now.”

“...it’s now? The opening ceremony is?”

“Yes, right now.”

“I see....”

I was a little surprised, but I’m just waiting for them to find the location of the ingredients and don’t have much else to do. Claire is always busy with managing our territory, so if I can help her out I’ll gladly do so.

— And, as a result of me blindly agreeing to help her, I was forced to change into a swimsuit and was now sitting on a deck chair on a sandy beach enjoying the summer sun.

I have no clue what’s going on or how I got here. I was thrown into a hut near the water and told to change clothes and wait for further instructions on the beach.

By the way, this beach is located along a lake inside Muhle. Until recently, there was no lake in Muhle....

"Sorry for the wait, otouto-kun."

Claire's voice could be heard from behind me.

"Claire, I've changed into a swimsuit just like you asked, but what are we –"

I turned to look at her and was left breathless.

Claire was wearing a tube top, black band bikini.

It emphasized her already large chest and the ring that connected it in the front revealed a lot of cleavage.

A beautiful platinum blonde woman that could easily be a model stood before me.

Her style has improved so much since we first met. I used to consider her a little childish but she's clearly become a woman now.

"H~ey, otouto-kun, if you stare too much I'll start to get embarrassed."

"– sorry."

I didn't realize how long I had been staring at her chest. When I panicked and looked up at her face, her cheeks were dyed a faint shade of pink.

"I thought this might be too bold, but...after seeing your reaction, Alice's choice seemed to be right."

"You look good. Alice suggested that?"

It's my favourite style so of course she did.

"Wasn't there something you wanted to ask, otouto-kun?"

"Oh, right...how long has this lake been here?"

"Alice actually made it."

"Of course, Alice...wait, what? She made...a lake?"

"Yep. She said something like, 'I want to wear a swimsuit during the summer, but there's no place to swim! All right~, let's make one!'"

"Seriously, Alice is just...."

I can understand her desire to wear a swimsuit during the summer, but for her to make an entire lake just to do so is a perfect example of how little self-restraint she has.

"It's not just for relaxation either. It can also be used as an emergency reservoir. Up until now, we've had to rely on Liz to pull water in from the river."

"...a reservoir."

It has more than one use. I took a look around at my surroundings.

The beach itself was beautiful and a tree line had been planted around the outer edge of the beach. The water of the lake was a clear, deep blue. As a whole, this beach could rival any modern day beach resort.

...but this is clearly a reservoir and not an oceanside resort.

"...so this is the lake's opening ceremony?"

"Hmm...? What are you talking about?"

"You told me you wanted me to attend the opening ceremony."

"Oh, that was just an excuse to gather everyone here. We're planning on opening it to the public tomorrow, so today I just wanted to have some fun with you and everyone else."

"Oh, okay. That sounds nice, but...who else is coming?"

Sophia was with me when Claire invited me, so she'll definitely be here, but.... As I was wondering who else might show up, I could hear a voice calling out my name.

"Leon onii-cha~n!"

When I looked over, I saw Sophia running across the beach in a swimsuit.

"Hey, you changed into a swimsuit as well, Sophia."

"Yep. Alice will be coming soon."

While we waited for her, I took some time to admire Sophia's swimsuit.

She was wearing a frilly one-piece. It complimented her cute style immensely and seemed fitting for her age.

“Ah, Alice onee-chan, over here!”

Sophia turned away from me to call over Alice. When she did, I was able to see her back and couldn’t stop myself from coughing. Her seemingly modest one-piece was actually a two-piece bikini from the back.

It was actually a monokini. Erotic. An adult design.

“So-Sophia, that swimsuit design is....”

“Ehehe~ What do you think? Does it suit me?”

“Eh...yeah, it looks good.”

In fact, it really suits her.... The back is low-cut and, even though her hips haven’t finished maturing, her chest is already so large.

When you look at her from the front, she looks cute in her swimsuit, but from behind she’s wearing a sexy swimsuit.... I don’t know how to describe this sensuous atmosphere it’s creating.

“Fufu~, I’m the one that coordinated her outfit.”

Alice poked her head around Sophia with a smug look on her face.

“Of course...it was Alice.”

This is a true, modern bikini.

The frills offer a cute appearance from the front, but, more than anything, they just serve to hide the true mature design of the bikini.

Although the swimsuit looks innocent with its white and cherry blossom colours, the design of the swimsuit is the exact opposite. I don’t want to admit it, but it suits my tastes perfectly.

“So? Do you like it? Does it make you excited?”

“Yeah. It suits you. And it excites — wait, why are you asking that!?”

I almost gave a real answer to her strange question.

“What...do you think?”

"I think that it really suits you, but don't you think you're showing a bit too much skin?"

In this world, men and women bathe together in underwear as well as being completely naked. So, for this world's standards, it's really not exposing that much skin.

However, it is showing too much skin for me. I'm not comfortable with how excited it makes me.

Currently, we're the only ones on the beach, so I don't think her wearing this swimsuit is terrible. However, I hate the idea of someone else seeing any of them exposing a lot of skin.

Alice said it should be fine and gave me a meaningful look. Why do I feel like she's done something terrible?

"These swimsuits are also engraved with inscription magic."

"Inscription magic.... Are you talking about lasers again? Are your swimsuits covered by a mysterious white light...? Wouldn't that be even lewder?"

The lasers on the school uniform prevent anyone else from seeing what's beneath them. That makes sense to me. But if these swimsuits are blocked by a white light, wouldn't they appear like they're not wearing anything?

When I said this, Alice wagged her finger at me.

"I didn't just add the lasers to the swimsuits. Look at this –"

Alice placed her hand on my back and put her other hand in front of me.

"...what is this?"

A pure white hand. It was like the sun was being perfectly reflected off of her hand.

"It's a cloth covering my hand, not my actual hand."

When I actually looked closer, I could see there was a transparent cloth covering her hand. It appeared shiny because the fabric was reflecting the sunlight.

"What is that...? Wait, a transparent cloth?"

I just noticed how strange this actually is. A transparent fabric like that can't exist in this world without the use of synthetic fibres.

"The thread used to make this comes from a demon spider. It's tough to sew with it because it's transparent, but it's strong and feels good to the touch."

"Oh...that's amazing. But how does this cover you?"

"You didn't notice? This was the pareo I was wearing a little while ago."

"...it was wrapped around you? Isn't that pointless considering it's transparent?"

"This cloth is only transparent to you, Leon."

"...what?"

Are these clothes that are invisible to an idiot?

"The inscription magic engraved on the swimsuits causes them to emit a bright light, but this will scatter the light that hits it. And what do you think that will do?"

Glass is only transparent because light can easily pass through it. If light were to be scattered on the mirror, no light would pass through and it would no longer be transparent.

"...everyone else will just see an opaque colour?"

"Sort of. To other people, it just looks like I'm wearing a colourful pareo."

"It just looks transparent to me.... Does the effect also negate the colours?"

"Basically."

"I-I see...."

So, Alice's pareo is made of a transparent fibre, but due to the inscription magic she has placed on it, it loses its transparency and just appears to be a normal pareo to everyone but me.

She told me that the back cutout on Sophia's swimsuit, as well as the exposed areas on her and Claire's swimsuits, were completely covered by this cloth.

And the swimsuit I'm wearing has been inscribed with magic that counters the effects of their swimsuits, allowing me to see everything — what a fool.

She's wasting all of her talents on these pointless things. There really is a thin line between genius and idiot.

Still...I'm the only one able to admire their bold swimsuits....

I enjoy looking at their swimsuits, but I hate the idea of other men seeing them. It's the perfect solution to the dilemma every man feels when they go to the beach with their girlfriend. This is a wonderful use of inscription magic.

All three of them have great style too. Their chests are big, they have narrow waists, and they all have beautiful faces.

Their bathing suits compliment their looks perfectly.

“ — Leon onii-chan seems to be thinking about us a lot.”

“Otouto-kun is so perverted.”

“Leon is a boy after all.”

“Please, stop reading my thoughts!”

I was told that the swimsuits of three beautiful women were only visible to me.

When something like that happens, it's impossible for me to think about anything else. I was trying to keep up a calm appearance, but reading my mind is just too cruel.

I've already hit puberty and have almost reached the end of adolescence.

— Actually, Sophia, if you keep reading my feelings, I won't pat your head anymore.

Sophia let out an audible gasp. She really was still reading my feelings. This girl really can't control herself.

“So, the opening ceremony was just pretext to get us all here, right? But is it okay for us to be messing around here?”

I asked Claire this.

"Well, I just thought it would be nice if we all had fun today. I invited the others as well, but they were all too busy to come."

"Well, that's too bad."

Since it's still summer, Liz is busy cooling the perishables, and since our academy has no summer vacation, Lyanna and Aisha were still busy in class.

Akane is busy with her family's business and Amy has gone back to the capital to help rebuild Wells' Clothing Shop.

Shouldn't Claire be busy as well? I guess Tina is hard at work.

"Hey, otouto-kun?"

"What is it?"

"What did you mean by, "...that's too bad?"

"You're just imagining things."

I accidentally let my real feelings out without realizing it.

"There's no need for you to deny it. Liz, Lyanna, Tina, and Amy are all your sisters now too."

"That's...."

They're all members of Sophia's club. Not too long after the club, Sisters, was started, Milli began treating each member of the club like they were her daughters.

In other words, they all became my adopted sisters.

Just how many members do they plan on having?

...things have gone too far.

Well, it's not like I'm planning on increasing the size of my harem.

Obviously, Claire and Sophia are exceptions. Just like Alice, they're both special to me.

And that's why I'm willing to accept these three. But that's all. I won't make any more exceptions.

...well, my adopted sisters will increase regardless of my own desires. But my

adopted sisters and my harem are two separate entities. So I'm sure it will be fine...probably.

Chapter 8: Determination

We were still on the beach in Muhle. Alice and Sophia stood opposite each other in front of me.

“You’ll never beat me, Alice onee-chan!”

“I won’t lose to you, Sophia-chan!”

They each struck dramatic poses and I thought I saw sparks fly. The atmosphere they gave off made it clear that no one else should interfere.

The next moment, Alice threw the beach ball she was holding high into the sky. Just as it reached its apex, she jumped after it and smashed it towards Sophia.

The ball flew forward and was inches from smashing into the white sand before Sophia slid beneath it and launched her own attack.

“Your thoughts are too easy to read, Alice onee-chan!”

She knocked the ball back into the air before quickly following it into the air and spiking it back towards Alice’s side of the court.

They’re playing beach volleyball, and normally, this would be considered a fault for a double touch. However, since this is supposed to be for fun and they’re playing one-on-one, this rule is ignored.

The ball was headed towards the opposite side of the court from Alice and was just going to land inbounds. Alice still hadn’t recovered from her previous attack. Even if it’s her, there’s no chance she’s getting there in time.

“— I’m not giving up yet!”

Alice used her spirit magic to accelerate her body towards the ball. She reached the line with incredible speed and received the ball before it hit the sand.

She carried her momentum forward, spun around in the sand, and launched herself into the air after the ball.

The ball continued to rise into the sky, but Alice caught up to hit and said,

“This is the end — wha— !?”

She had just hit the ball when she saw something that made her gasp. Just beyond the beach ball, Sophia was level with Alice and also had her right hand raised.

“Didn’t I tell you —?”

Sophia hit the ball that was already flying at a tremendous speed. Instead of blocking the attack, she launched an immediate counterattack. She timed it perfectly as if she knew exactly what Alice was planning.

The ball launched forward and buried itself deep into the sand of Alice’s court.

Sophia slowly fell back down to earth. She brushed her fluffy blonde hair out of her face and showed an innocent smile.

“— Alice onee-chan, your thoughts were wide open.”

“It was impossible to win even using spirit magic.... Sophia-chan, you’re too amazing.”

Alice collapsed to her knees the moment she landed on the beach.

“You’re not going to join them, otouto-kun?”

The deck chair I was sitting on was lined up in a row of several other chairs. As I was watching this intense scene between them, Claire, who was sitting next to me, quietly muttered this.

“With those two? Do you want me to die?”

“Yeah, I guess I know what you mean. If you were to try to join those two when they’re exercising in their swimsuits, you’d be too distracted by their chests and you’d probably get nailed by the ball.”

“Yeah, exactly — that’s not what I meant! I’m purely talking about the difference in our skill level.”

Certainly, the sight of their chests bouncing in their skimpy swimsuits would be a hard thing to ignore, but, having witnessed their intense battle just now, I’d be more concerned about my own life.

“Otouto-kun, you can use spirit magic too, right?”

“I know I’ve improved significantly, but comparing me to Alice is like comparing heaven to earth.”

There’s no chance I’d be able to use air walls as platforms to climb into the air. Nor would I be capable of using such advanced magic so quickly. And even with Alice’s skill level, she was being pushed hard by Sophia’s ability.

I’d stand no chance against either of them.

“By the way...I wanted to thank you.”

These were the words I had wanted to say for a while now.

“For giving you the opportunity to see everyone in their swimsuits?”

“That’s not it. For giving Sophia something to take her mind off what’s happened.”

Alice may have created this lake by coincidence, but it wasn’t a coincidence that Claire invited us at this time.

“It’s not a big deal.... It’s only natural that I’d be worried about my cute younger sister.”

Claire showed a small smile as she watched Sophia; she genuinely looked like an older sister watching her younger sister.

“But....Sophia won’t truly be okay until she’s able to save Elyse. Otouto-kun, will you support her properly?”

“Of course, I’ll do whatever I can.”

I nodded and turned back to watch Sophia and Alice’s game. As I was watching them, I felt like I could hear a faint voice calling out to me.

“...Claire, did you just say my name?”

“It wasn’t me. It sounded like it came from behind us.”

I turned to look but didn’t see anyone. However, under the shade of a tree, there appeared to be the silhouette of a person.

“Is someone there?”

“...umm, Leon-sama, it’s me.”

Along with her modest voice, her face emerged from behind the tree.

“Tina? What are you doing over there?”

“This is, well, umm....”

“Oh~?”

Claire realized something and walked over to Tina with a mischievous smile.

She hooked her arm around Tina’s and pulled her out from behind the tree.

Tina was dragged out into the sunlight, exposing her one-piece swimsuit that had a floral pattern.

“Did you come to swim, Tina?”

“N-No, I received information about the location of the ingredients you’ve been looking for. I just came to give you that report.”

“Oh, well, thank you...but why are you in a swimsuit?”

“Otouto-kun, you should be able to figure that out without asking. She obviously came to show it off to you.”

Claire replied for Tina. The moment she said this, Tina’s face turned a deep red.

“I see.... Tina?”

“Yes!?”

“Your swimsuit is really cute. It gives off a mature image and really suits you, Tina.”

“T-Thank you very much.”

I tried to act as calm as possible as I gave my answer.

With Claire here, if I showed any embarrassment, she’d never stop teasing me about it.

Thinking about this, I looked at Claire to see her giving me a thumbs up and

mouthing the words 'good job'....eh? Is that what Claire wanted?

"Anyway...you said you had a report?"

"Yes. First off, the nail of an Earth Dragon. It seems that the Marquis of Gramp actually possesses one. I considered opening up negotiations with him but have yet to do so, but without a doubt he has one."

"Crane...."

It might be part of a collection of his. If we pay him an appropriate compensation, we should be able to obtain it, but...if it's him, there's a chance he'll refuse.

"And what about the Lyk Skull Bear?"

"It seems that it is a rare species born from a mutation of the Garu Bear. For every one Lyk Skull Bear, there are several hundred Garu Bears."

"A rare species.... Where are they located?"

"Their primary habitat seems to be dense forests and the nearest forest matching that description is in the Marquis of Gramp's territory."

"I see...."

Conveniently, I can obtain both ingredients in the Marquis' territory. I needed to visit him anyway, so this is the perfect opportunity to tackle several issues at once.

— She gave a serious report...while wearing a swimsuit.

To be honest, I was unsure of where to look while she was speaking. Well, I got through it somehow.

And so, it was decided that I along with four others would travel to the Marquis' territory. Sophia and Alice came along with Milli as our caretaker and Elsa as our escort.

Claire still needed to manage our territory and was too busy to take time off to come with us.

I felt sorry but it couldn't be helped.

It was now the next day.

Several citizens of the Grances territory and a few of our friends came to see us off before we left the city in a horse-drawn carriage.

Before our highway and carriage upgrades, it would've taken one week to get to his territory, but now it should only take three days. It seems a little much for there to be so many people gathered here to see us off.

Well, it's actually nice that so many people came. Several of the citizens said farewell to everyone travelling with me.

In the meantime, I spoke with Liz.

"I'm sorry that you have to stay here, Liz."

"It gets lonely staying here by myself, but I expected this when I took on this role, so I'll just have to try my best. Leon onii-sama, please be careful on your trip."

"Thank you. I'll be careful."

I gently stroked Liz's head as we said our goodbyes. Then, I turned to Akane.

"Akane, I trust that things are progressing well?"

"You don't need to worry. You've entrusted me with it and I've already started working towards transitioning away from our original method."

"That's what's most important."

Akane and I are working on a plan to have the mages at the relay points refreeze the perishables in place of Liz.

We spoke vaguely because Liz still doesn't know we're working on this.

As Liz herself has said, she feels that the work she does is rewarding but lonesome. I wanted to come up with a plan to give her some free time without making her think that we didn't need her anymore.

"Also, here you go. Here are the items you asked me to get."

"T-Thank you."

Akane handed me a small wrapped package. Inside, were Alice Brand hair

ornaments. I was too embarrassed and worried about being found out to go buy them myself, so I asked Akane to get them for me.

“By the way, who are you going to give that too?”

“It’s a secret.”

I smiled and pocketed the small package.

After that, I spoke with Akane for a few more minutes before we finished our conversation.

I looked around the area and saw Claire with Tina and Michelle. I also saw that Lyanna and Aisha were with them.

“Claire, actually...I don’t have anything special to say.”

“Wait a minute, otouto-kun? Isn’t that a terrible thing to say to your sister? You don’t have anything to say about managing the territory while you’re gone — or really anything at all!?”

“You’re usually the one handling most things concerning our territory. Even if I’m not here, you know what you’re doing.”

“It’s nice that you believe in me so much, but would it kill you to say something nice to me before leaving?”

I know I should, but I’m embarrassed — fine, I don’t have to say anything. Instead, I embraced her.

“O-Otouto-kun?”

“I’ll get the Lyk Skull Bear’s liver and be back as soon as I can. Until then, the Grances territory is in your care.”

“...of course, leave it to me. So don’t worry about our territory and be safe on your journey.”

We patted each other on the back and pulled away. Finally, I turned my eyes to the other four people.

“During my absence, please assist Claire with anything regarding the school or its students.”

“You can count on me. After all, I’m Claire-sama’s assistant.”

Tina gave a nice response and Michelle, Aisha, and Lyanna all nodded.

After we all said our goodbyes, we departed to the Marquis of Gramp's territory.

Our goal was to save Elyse. To do that, we must collect the ingredients needed for her medicine. I personally don't care about Elyse, but I don't want Sophia to grieve.

And that's why I pledged to save Elyse for Sophia.

Chapter 9: Imitation

We were visiting the Marquis of Gramp's territory for the first time in a while. As we travelled through the countryside, the towns and villages we passed were hardly recognizable. Even the smallest of villages appeared to be prospering.

As we got to the town Crane lived in, it was clear that Crane had begun redeveloping the entirety of the city starting from the centre. There was a clear point where the old buildings ended and where buildings following our designs began. Most of the newer buildings were centred around Crane's mansion.

There were still many sections of the town that were under construction but everyone we passed seemed bright and lively.

The Marquis was the first to be taught our techniques and given our technology, and since then, he has been striving to improve the standard of living for the commoners in his territory. And it seems that the effects are starting to show.

Another way to increase the standard of living for the commoners is to reduce the superiority the nobility has over them. At first, none of the nobles would even consider this as an option.

However, more recently, most nobles have been reconsidering.

This may seem strange but it's not like they did this out of the kindness of their hearts. Even if they were to give up their large mansions and live in the most basic of houses built following our designs, their own standard of living would drastically increase. Seeing that they stood to benefit as well led to them reconsidering.

For example...increased tax revenue. Using our technology, any noble lord is capable of drastically improving the lives of their people. Previously, lords would do whatever they could to squeeze every last coin out of their citizens, all the while doing little to improve their lives.

People living in towns improved by our technology will earn more money, pay less for daily necessities, and live better more rewarding lives. It should go

without saying which of these two would be more willing to pay higher taxes.

As a result, lords that had embraced our policies had prospered along with their towns and people. Now that several years had passed since many lords began using our technology, the difference between their cities and older cities was startling.

This has led to many more taking note of the increased prosperity of these lords and they too have started embracing our policies.

This has led to this country's wealth increasing little by little. And the Marquis of Gramp, who was the first to be taught our technology, has improved his territory far more than any others.

As evidence of this, the commoners were all prospering, and Crane's mansion was also improved significantly. Alice and I redesigned it without showing any self-restraint. It's of equal quality to our own mansion.

And it wasn't just the facade but also the interior.

We entered the mansion and were led into the drawing room. The carpet was soft and fluffy and the sofa was comfortable. As expected of the Marquis.

We were left to wait in this room for only a short while before the Marquis of Gramp appeared.

An elderly butler stood next to him. I believe we've met before.

I think his name was...Joseph.

"Thank you for coming, Leon. And you as well, Lady Sophia and...Lady Alistair."

Oh, Crane actually remembered Alice's name.

Even though she's a little old for him to be interested in.... He actually managed to remember the name of someone that isn't a young girl.

"Good afternoon, Crane. Your home has truly become amazing since our last visit."

"Oh this? Lady Claire lent me an engineer, so I was able to do this in a short amount of time. She's also helped out in many other ways."

I gave a bitter smile after hearing this. As expected of Claire. She does so much more than I even know about.

"So, Leon, I read your letter before your arrival. You're here looking for something?"

"Yes. I'm looking for two ingredients that I've been told are in your territory for a medicine that will cure Sophia's mother of her illness."

"Oi, oi, as usual, you have trouble expressing yourself properly. How badly do you think I'll look if anyone finds out that information like that is leaking from my territory?"

"...how would you look bad?"

Crane lifted the edge of his mouth in a sneer.

I thought it was strange for him to be reacting like this, but Sophia pulled on my sleeve before I could speak.

I turned to her to see what she wanted but she wasn't even facing me.

...hmm. Oh, I remember.

When we came to negotiate with the Marquis before, I told Sophia to pull on my sleeve whenever he was lying.

That was years ago but I remember it clearly.

So what he said just now was a lie. He's not actually worried about himself, he's actually worried about how I'm handling the situation with Sophia and her mother.

Is Crane a tsundere now? I don't know how I feel about a middle-aged tsundere.

"...is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing. Thank you for your concern. But I don't think you have to worry about that happening. There's not many who'd speak ill of a house so close to my own."

"Ha, that's true."

Crane kept up his act until the end. Sophia showed me that he was really just

worried about me.... Well, I won't say anything.

"We're looking for the two ingredients. The first is the liver of the Lyk Skull Bear."

"...Lyk Skull Bear? Do you mean a Garu Bear?"

Crane tilted his head and Joseph whispered into his ear that the Lyk Skull Bear was a mutated species born from the Garu Bear.

"They're a mutation?"

"Yes. From what I know, there's one born for every several hundred Garu Bears."

"Several hundred? All right...."

After the brief exchange with Joseph, Crane furrowed his brow.

"Is there a problem, Crane?"

"A Garu Bear is a monster that resembles an ordinary bear, except they're much larger and rarer. If you're saying this Lyk Skull Bear is born in one out of several hundred, then it must be considerably rare."

"In other words, it will be hard to find."

"Exactly. In addition, the fur of the Garu Bear sells for a large sum so the fur of this rare mutation must be even more valuable."

"That's...going to be a problem."

On top of it being a rare species, the price of its fur means that hunters would target this animal specifically. There's few to begin with and they won't live long due to hunters. This makes it considerably harder to find.

"How long does she have?"

"It's hard to say for sure, but...maybe a year."

I don't really understand how they're maintaining Elyse's health, but they have medicines that can slow the progression of the disease. They've given her a year to live.

"All right. We have some time to work with. You could try putting a request

up at the adventurer's guild."

"The adventurer's guild? You should've only completed that recently. Is it up and running?"

"It's still small scale but they've already begun accepting requests to gather materials."

"Is that so? Then, I'll check it out later."

I was the one that suggested he build an adventurer's guild but I never expected that they'd be helping me.

"You said you were looking for two ingredients earlier. What's the second?"

"It's the claw of an earth dragon. I've heard that you have one."

"The claw of an earth dragon...I certainly do. It's a family heirloom passed down from generation to generation."

"A family heirloom...?"

"The first lord of my house married a princess as a reward for killing an earth dragon and was also granted the title of marquis. The claw serves as a form of proof."

"Is that so...."

It's worse than I anticipated.

I thought it was just part of a collection of his. If that were the case we could either trade with him or buy it outright. But if it holds significance to him and his family, he may not be willing to sell it for any amount of money.

"You look troubled. Do you think I won't be willing to part with it?"

"...eh? It's important to you, isn't it?"

"The earth dragon's claw certainly is an important family heirloom. However, what you've done for my family and our people is far more significant than an heirloom could ever be. I'll happily hand it over on one condition."

"What is this condition...?"

There's no chance I'm giving him Claire if he's still interested in her. I shouldn't get defensive until after I've heard what he has to say.

"There are actually two conditions, one of which you've already agreed to. As I told you before, I'd like you to inspect the guild and the school and report any problems you encounter to me."

"I have no problem with that.... And the second?"

"Well, it's actually — wait just one moment."

Crane said this and snapped his fingers. Shortly after, a small...no, a young girl with a rather mature body entered the room.

She appeared to be around ten years old. Is she a servant here? The girl was wearing a set of high-quality maid clothes but the outfit had an extremely short mini-skirt and it exposed a lot of skin.

The girl lifted the hem of her skirt and curtsied.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Earl of Grances. My name is Lori. I am Crane onii-sama's younger step-sister."

— I have so many questions I'm not even sure where to start.

"...umm, did you mean to say you're Crane's step-daughter?"

"No, I'm onii-sama's step-sister. I plan to become his mistress as soon as I turn twelve."

Isn't that a crime in several different ways!?

"Crane, I don't think you should be making moves on minors...."

"Don't worry. I am nothing if not a gentleman and I won't lay a hand on such a young girl. I'll wait until she's all grown up."

...as expected of a lolicon. He's basically saying he'll wait until she's old enough to be married, and Crane will be thirty-five years old this year.

Well...the children of this world do mature fast. A twelve-year-old would have the appearance of a high schooler on Earth. If I think about it as a thirty-year-old man marrying a high schooler...nope, it's still wrong.

I also don't understand why he made her his step-sister if she's going to be his

mistress.

“By the way, Crane, are your parents still alive?”

“No, they passed away when I was still young.”

“Umm...then, who adopted Lori?”

“Don’t worry about the details. It’s enough to say that she’s been adopted into my house.”

“What is that supposed to mean!?”

“You of all people should know what I’m talking about. By adopting them into my house, I slowly increase the size of my harem. I’m just following your example.”

“...what?”

This guy is saying something completely ridiculous! Just following my lead...? No, that’s exactly what I’m doing, isn’t it?

This is how other people view me!? The mental damage this has caused me is significant.

“Leon, what’s most important is how they feel about each other, right?”

Alice whispered into my ear.

Just as she said, Lori didn’t appear sad and seemed actually excited to be with the Marquis. This must be what she actually wants.

...whatever, I won’t push any further into their business.

“Fine, I understand who Lori is to you but how does she relate to your second condition?”

“Ah, actually –”

The second condition was to help resolve a certain dispute that had been going on for many years between the Full-Flat family and the Gramp family. And Lori was somehow involved in this.

I...I have a terrible feeling about this.

Chapter 10: Plains and Mountains

"You want me to help you end your dispute.... Does that mean the Marquis of Full-Flat is here now?"

"Yes. We were already in a meeting before you arrived and we're currently on a short break. We'll be resuming the meeting shortly and I'd like you to be there with me."

...I wonder if I should go. This man holds enough power to openly quarrel with Crane. Honestly, I don't want to join Crane if it means potentially making an enemy out of someone like that.

In order to save Sophia's mother, I need the earth dragon's claw in Crane's possession. I can't refuse him.

A short while later, the Marquis of Full-Flat appeared.

Apparently, this man has only recently begun redeveloping his territory following our designs and using our technology. However, even though he only just started, his territory is nearly as advanced as Crane's territory.

He holds power equal to Crane but could be considered even more influential in the country. He was a handsome middle-aged man, similar to Crane.

And behind him, also similar to Crane, a young girl followed. She was short as well but there was one clear difference. She was completely flat.

"You are the head of the Grances family?"

"– it's a pleasure to meet you, Marquis of Full-Flat. Please, feel free to call me Leon."

"...hou~, what's this? It's just as you said, Crane."

"Kuku, were you surprised? But I can assure you, this is him."

"I certainly was, but this makes things more interesting."

I lowered my head as they were laughing at something I didn't understand. When I raised my face, I could see the Marquis of Full-Flat carefully examining me.

"...umm, did I say something rude?"

"That's not the case. In fact, it's actually the opposite. Why are you speaking so formally?"

"...I'm very sorry, but I don't understand your meaning."

I'm an earl and this man is a marquis. Although, technically, he's only one rank higher than me, that one rank is an enormous gap. I speak more casually with Crane but this is my first time meeting this marquis.

"...hmm. Do you believe that you're actually beneath him?"

"I am an earl."

"It's true that the highest rank in your family is that of an earl."

"I still don't quite understand your meaning."

I would've understood if they told me I wasn't being polite enough, but I'm stunned to hear them say it's the opposite.

"What I'm saying is that all the power in this country goes through you. For example, financial power. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say that most of the gold in Rizelheim first flows through the Grances house."

"No, that's not true at all. Last year we had a minor surplus."

"And that's after you constructed an entire town and completely redid the highway system throughout the entire country. If it were any other family, they'd be in financial ruin."

"Well, that's...."

Alice and I really went overboard. I never even thought about how much the many projects we've done would cost under normal means.

"And you didn't even save the money you received from the capital. You spent it to aid many other territories. I'm sure most of the nobility in this country would gladly side with you on any issue. On top of this, you've also gained the trust of Crown Prince Alberto, and he even sent his sister-in-law, Princess Liselotte, to stay with you. Honestly...how are you still just an earl?"

"Well, even if you say that...."

In general, it's possible to reach the rank of earl with only money and fame. Advancing above that rank requires considerably more. We've only just recently gained power and rebuilt our own territory, so it's unlikely that I'd be given the rank of marquis anytime soon.

"Does it even make sense to you that Crown Prince Alberto would give sole responsibility to someone as low ranking as an earl when it concerns something as important as remodelling the country's highway system?"

"I can't pretend to know Crown Prince Alberto's thoughts on the matter."

The remodelling of the highway system was something I had planned on my own before ever speaking with Alberto. I even paid for it using my own coin. I feel like that would have the opposite effect I'd want if I were to say it.

...not to mention the fact that even though remodelling the highways cost a small fortune, my house still would still stand to make a profit.

"Hmm...well, it's fine. You don't have to speak so formally with me. I'd be fine if you spoke to me the same way you do with Crane."

Honestly...I still wished to decline, but after noticing Crane staring at me, I decided to agree.

"I understand. I'll speak more casually if that's what you want."

After, I changed my way of speaking the Marquis of Full-Flat reached into his breast pocket.

"Now that we're on more friendly terms, you really are the legendary Leon, aren't you!?"

"...eh? That was a sudden change. And you're calling me a legend?"

"Yes. I've heard from Crane that you have a number of young ladies that have become your sisters-in-law and you're conquering them one-by-one!"

Wait, Crane!? What are you telling other people!?

I turned my scornful gaze to Crane but he was looking away, feigning ignorance.

I wanted my house to become a light guiding this country into a better future,

but it seems I've become a light guiding all of this country's lolicons towards their own harems.

"So, Owen, don't you think he's the perfect man to settle this dispute between us?"

"Hmm...let's see."

The Marquis of Full-Flat said this before turning his gaze to Sophia and Alice. He looked them over before frowning.

...what? I feel bad seeing him frown after looking at them. I was wondering why he looked displeased when a small grin began to form at the edge of his mouth.

"Well, if it's a man with tastes like him, I feel like he can make a fair judgement."

"Ah, of that, I have no doubts. He has various types of sisters-in-law."

They exchanged secretive words between each other that I was unable to hear.

I don't know what they're talking about, but...I have a terrible feeling about what they're about to say.

"What is better suited for the body of a young girl: big breasts or small breasts?"

This is what Crane said.... I couldn't care less.

"Umm...aren't both fine?"

How is this the dispute that's been plaguing their houses for so long? I said something that I thought wouldn't be controversial —

"I think the combination of large breasts with a small frame, like Lori, brings out the true charm in a girl. But Owen has always held the belief that flat is justice."

"Naturally! A young girl is nothing but an immature bud herself. She's still growing and developing and her body should reflect that. Above all else, Pettan is justice!"

I wondered what he meant by ‘Pettan’ but I could see the young girl behind the Marquis fidgeting shyly. I’m guessing that’s her name.

“What is this heresy!? How can you not understand the unbalanced beauty of a big-breasted loli!?”

“What unbalanced beauty!? You just like large chests!”

...yeah, these two aren’t listening to each other at all.

Honestly, I don’t want to make a decision and risk making an enemy of one of them.

I don’t want to, but...in order to get the earth dragon’s talon, I have to end this dispute.

...I’d rather return home and not risk making either of them my enemy even if it costs Elyse her life. But there’s no way I could allow Sophia to experience such sadness.... With that thought in mind, I spoke up.

“Which is justice: big-breasted lolis or flat chested lolis? I can safely say that no matter how many people you ask this, you’ll never get a definitive answer. So this dispute is meaningless.”

I did my best to try to get them to end this peacefully.

“I already know that. But that doesn’t change the fact that flat is justice.”

“We’re trying to determine which holds more justice.”

...these lolicons.

But now I’m in trouble. How am I supposed to answer?

I need the earth dragon’s claw, so the obvious choice is to side with Crane.... However, the Full-Flat family is of equal rank to Crane. I’d rather avoid making them an enemy if possible.

As I was wondering what I should do, my eyes met with Alice. Alice nodded as if to say, “Leave it to me.”

I felt a sense of uncertainty, but...things won’t end well anyway if I can’t decide what to do. In other words, I decided to leave this to Alice.

"You're both fundamentally wrong."

Alice boldly spoke up and interrupted their argument.

"Hmm, Alistair. A near immortal being like you could never understand."

"Exactly. Your race matures far too fast for you to ever be able to understand the true beauty of a young girl."

Crane and the Marquis of Full-Flat could agree on this. Alice's words were casually disregarded by them, but she didn't back down. She grabbed both of Sophia's shoulders from behind and walked her forward.

Alice pulled up on Sophia's top, causing Sophia's chest to lift up and bounce around once Alice let go.

"Fueh~? A-Alice onee-chan?"

"Sophia-chan is an example of a true young girl."

Alice continued speaking to the marquis regardless of Sophia's confusion.

I agree that Sophia is extremely cute, but...does that mean Alice is siding with Crane?

And it seems that I wasn't the only one that thought so.

"As expected of someone Leon trusts so much. She's actually able to see the truth!"

Crane let out a bright smile as the Marquis of Full-Flat looked as if he just experienced a crushing defeat.

"Both of you seem to have misunderstood. I'm not saying she's a true young girl because she has a large chest."

"...what?"

"– hah!?"

This time, Crane furrowed his eyebrows and the Marquis was excitedly awaiting Alice's words.

"Sophia-chan is not yet twelve-years-old. She gives off the image of a pure

and innocent young maiden. Yet, she's begun studying ways to please Leon!"

"—ways to please him!?"

"Is this true!?"

Crane and Full-Flat's gaze focused on Sophia. Alice was still holding Sophia's shoulders, so she was unable to escape and could only shyly nod.

After witnessing this, both of the marquises gulped.

"Fufu~n, it seems you both understand. This is Sophia-chan's true appeal! Whether she has a large chest or is flat as a board, what truly matters is the difference between what's inside and out! The charm of a true young girl comes from the stark contrast created by her innocent exterior and the lust-filled thoughts she holds inside!"

What is this girl talking about? But the Marquis of Full-Flat and Crane seemed to understand and were nodding while saying, "I see, I see."

If it means their dispute can be settled amicably, I have no problem with what she's saying.

Besides, I can understand Sophia's charm better than most. *Gulp*

— I shouldn't be thinking about that now. And it's not like I'm interested in Sophia because I'm a lolicon like them.

Actually, the term 'lolicon' shouldn't even apply to me. Children in this world mature fast, and a twelve-year-old in this world looks like a high schooler on Earth. Sophia is slightly younger than that so she looks like a junior high school student.

The difference in age between Crane and the Marquis of Full-Flat and a young girl is just too much for me to think it's okay. But I'm only sixteen. So it isn't strange for me to be attracted to a girl only a few years younger than me.

...well, if you consider my age from my previous life.... I should just stop that train of thought. Besides, I honestly think my mental age isn't that high. I feel like my physical age has caused my mental age to progress slower.

Children in this world start maturing significantly slower once they reach sixteen, so it's better if I just stop worrying about this.

— getting back to the subject.

Is a true young girl one with a large chest or one that's flat?

The long-lasting dispute between these two families had finally been settled.
The disparity of a pure young girl's corrupted interior is true justice.

But...they didn't notice a clear flaw in Alice's argument.

Even if the difference between the pure exterior and the corrupted interior is what makes young girls so great, which between a large chested girl and a flat girl is most likely to show this difference. This problem had yet to be solved.

Well...it doesn't matter so I won't mention it. I still need that claw. If they're both satisfied then I am too.

Now, I just need the liver and to inspect the guild and the school. I thought these would be easier than settling their dispute.

Chapter 11: Sacred Place

Three materials are needed to create the cure for Elyse. Two of these, the claw of an earth dragon and the leaves of the world tree, have already been found.

To find the final ingredient, we need to prioritize finding a Lyk Skull Bear.

In order to accomplish this goal, I first need to inspect the state of the adventurer's guild. The guild was located at the edge of town so we decided to head there on foot.

The city of Vesta where Crane lives has developed significantly since the last time I visited several years ago. It's comparable to Muhle.

That being said, this is only the case for the section of the city that has been redeveloped. There were still many buildings remaining that were built following this world's old way of constructing buildings.

"Hey, Leon onii-chan...thank you."

As we were walking through the old town on our way to the guild, Sophia hugged my arm. Her crimson eyes turned into half moons as she smiled.

"Why are you thanking me?"

"Because you're going through so much to get the ingredients. You're doing that for me to help my mom. So, thank you."

"If that's all, you don't need to worry about thanking me."

"Okay. Then, I guess I'm sorry?"

"...you don't have to do that either. Anyway...you're welcome."

A few years ago, when Patrick was still trying to get Sophia, she apologized and said, "Sorry for all the trouble I'm causing you."

Now, she's thanking me for trying hard for her. It makes me happy to see how close we've grown.

"...Leon onii-chan?"

“Everything is fine. And, you weren’t trying to read my feelings were you?”

I stopped her before she could even attempt to use her ability. Sophia puffed out her cheeks for a moment and then smiled and said, “If Leon onii-chan says so.”

“I’m surprised you’re not showing more resistance.”

“Even if I’m not actively using my ability, I can still read your basic emotions. I can tell without even trying that you’re thinking something kind, so I know there’s no reason for me to try to read your heart.”

“I-I see....”

It’s a bit embarrassing hearing her say that face-to-face. Rather, I still felt like Sophia was a child but she’s starting to look like an adult.

“Hey, Leon onii-chan, at the adventurer’s guild, you can put up requests to gather materials, right? Do you think they’ll be able to obtain the liver of a Lyk Skull Bear?”

“I think it should be fine. Of course, I don’t expect for them to find one straight away.”

There are a few things that I’m uncertain about, but...I won’t mention them in order to not worry Sophia. Depending on how well she’s able to unconsciously read my feelings, she may be able to understand anyway.

“– By the way, Alice, what’s going on with you?”

I tried to change the subject by asking Alice, who was walking alongside Sophia, this.

“Eh?”

“Don’t ‘eh’ me. You’re clearly excited about something.”

She’s almost skipping as she walked with us, and for some time now, I’ve heard her humming lightly.

“We’re going to an Adventurer’s Guild! An Adventurer’s Guild! A senior adventurer might pick a fight with us, but little does he know that these rookie adventurers will do something amazing and rise to the top in no time! The

promises are abounding!"

"...and that's why you're so excited? You realize we're not going there to become adventurers, right? We're just going to make a request and leave. Those promises you're talking about aren't going to happen."

The moment I said this, Alice's joyful expression changed into despair and her elf ears drooped down in disappointment.

Isn't she overreacting a bit? It might seem like an exciting experience to her, but to a person like me that would just be dragged in, it just seems bothersome.

"H-Hey, Leon onii-chan? Are we not going to register as adventurers?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

"It's something all girls want to do."

"...ha?"

That doesn't make any sense.

Alice could easily defeat any senior adventurers and conquer the entire guild with her spirit magic. So, that explains her desire to join, but...why would any other girl want to join?

"For example — there may be adventurers that think two pretty girls like us shouldn't be allowed to join the guild! When they confront us, you'll rush to our aid and protect the weak Sophia and me."

"...weak?"

"...weak."

She responded back with a smile. The image of her dazzling smile was amazing but...how is she in any way weak?

She's an expert spirit mage and she's also well-trained in close quarters combat. Even though she's cute, she's not weak.

While we were talking about this, we arrived in front of the guild.

The guild's building was the only unique building in this entire district.

We entered into the main hall of the guild. The main room was large and wide

open. The guild had only recently opened but the room was very crowded. There were many adventurers but also quite a few ordinary citizens gathered here.

“Wow~, that receptionist, Sarah, was really cute today.”

“I might be turning into a lolicon.”

“Oi, oi, I understand your feelings, but it’s only okay to watch and not touch. You don’t want to become like Daniel, do you?”

“I know that. And don’t lump me in with someone like him.”

I could overhear the conversation of two adventurers that passed by us. The content of their conversation was strange, but...for now, we just need to move on into the guild.

Let’s head to reception first. I’m not trying to meet this ‘Sarah,’ it’s just the obvious place to go first.

With that being said, we headed to the counter located near the back of the guild. At first, there was nobody there, but not long after we arrived, a girl around twelve or thirteen came running out of a back room to greet us.

“Welcome to the Adventurer’s Guild! This is our main office located in Vesta. Is this your first time visiting u — aaahhhhh!?”

The young receptionist pointed at me and let out a scream. The formerly loud room was now dead quiet and everyone was focused on us.

“Y-Y-You’re –!”

“Shh! Shh!”

I don’t know why, but it seems she knows that I’m Leon. I noticed this and quickly gestured for her to remain silent.

“...e-excuse me. Umm...your name is Leo, right?”

If she knows my fake name, does that mean she was a student at the same time as me? Well, there were many students at the academy that came from Crane’s territory.

And this girl seems to match the name mentioned by those adventurers.

“Sara-chan?”

“Yes. I’m honoured that you remember my name!”

The only reason I know that is because of those adventurers, but...she seems pretty happy so I won’t mention it.

“Now then, Leo-san, what business did you have with the guild today?”

“Ah, well actually –”

I planned on opening a request for the liver of a Lyk Skull Bear, but before I could finish, Sara interrupted me.

“– I’m sorry. Why am I even asking? Of course, you’re here to register to become a guild member. Let me first explain the terms and conditions of your membership.”

“Wait a moment, please. I really don’t need to hear that.”

“Ah, I’m so sorry! Of course, someone like Leo-san wouldn’t need that explained to him. Then, we can move directly to registration. You’ll start off as an E-ranked adventurer. Something like an apprentice –”

“No, seriously, my reason for coming here –”

“– Ah, I understand. We’ll skip the apprenticeship period altogether. You’ll start at A rank which is the highest rank currently available in the guild.”

Aaaahh. This girl is the type of person that doesn’t listen to other people at all. I have to solve this misunderstanding quickly or else this could become troublesome —

“Oi, oi, Sara, a brat like this isn’t deserving of becoming an A rank.”

I was too late!

All I could do was sigh. I had to pinch Alice’s side to get her to stop smiling as she said, “The promised event is here!”

I reluctantly turned around to see an intimidating middle-aged man towering over me.

“Oi, brat. I don’t know what rich family you come from, but an adventurer’s rank is something you earn with your skill, not something you buy with money.”

“This is a misunderstanding. A complete misunderstanding.”

I tried to come up with an excuse but the old man just laughed.

“You can try and say whatever you want, but the rank determines what requests you receive. If you gain position without the ability to back it up, both you and the person that made the request will be unhappy.”

Eh...this guy, even though he looks intimidating, he’s saying something honest.

He just looks like a bad guy, but inside, he’s a decent person —

“So, Sarah, I don’t know how much he’s paid you but this is wrong.”

“Excuse me but I have done nothing wrong.”

“Ha, I heard what you said. You were trying to make this brat rank A. Unless you want me to tell Gilmaus about this, you’ll go out with me tonight.”

— this old geezer’s a lolicon too!?

What is this? Why are there so many lolicons in Crane’s territory!? Is the Marquis of Gramp’s territory a sacred place for them? Even as I thought this, the argument between them continued.

“Please, stop talking about things you don’t understand. Leo-san possesses enough ability to be rank A!”

“Oh? Then this brat should have no trouble defeating a rank B adventurer like me.”

“Of course! Leo-san could defeat you without even being touched, Daniel!”

Sarah was getting fired up and the old man named Daniel showed a lecherous smile.

“Is that so? If you’re so confident, if this brat loses to me, you’ll agree to stay with me overnight.”

"Why would I ever agree to a bet like that!?"

"Oh, what's wrong? Weren't you sure this brat would win? Or will you just admit you were in the wrong?"

"Absolutely not! Fine! I accept that bet! And when you lose, you'll agree to never make such advances on me again!"

...why don't I have any say in this? Daniel seems completely obsessed with Sarah. Will this girl really be okay?

"Umm, Sarah-chan? I actually had a reason for coming here and was hoping to not cause any problems."

"It's fine. Leo-san, you're the victim here. No matter what you do to Daniel, the guild guarantees that no fault will lie with you. Please, do your best!"

"I don't care whose fault it is, I just don't want any trouble!"

"Actually, Daniel's sexual harassment was getting out of hand so I thought this would be a good opportunity to stop it."

"You're a surprisingly formidable woman!"

...hmm. If Sara were to complain to Crane that an older man was harassing a young girl like her, I'm sure he wouldn't take it seriously.... It must be difficult for a girl like her to survive in this place.

I give up. I still need to make a request for the guild, and if the adventurers here hate me, I'm guessing I'll have trouble getting someone to take my request. If there's no other way to clear up this misunderstanding, then I don't have much choice.

"Then, I guess you leave me no choice –"

"You there! Stop your bickering this instant!"

A commanding voice cut through the silent room to save me. At the same time, I could hear Alice's disappointed sigh...maybe that last part was just my imagination.

Chapter 12: Request

I looked towards the voice that saved me and saw a man and a woman who looked slightly older than me that were dressed as adventurers.

Sarah smiled at them as they approached.

“Melissa, Max, have you already completed your escort mission?”

“Yeah. The client’s carriage was one of those new ones. I really can’t thank the Earl of Grances enough.”

I almost started coughing uncontrollably after unexpectedly hearing my name. I never thought I’d hear my name being praised so far from my home. And Sarah-chan was just nodding while saying, “That’s true~”

“Anyway, Sarah, why are you suggesting two guild members fight? Show a little self-restraint.”

“Hau~.... I’m sorry.”

After being scolded by the adventurer named Melissa, Sarah chan bowed her head silently. Melissa watched this before turning her eyes toward Daniel.

“You as well, Daniel. Don’t argue with the rookie about Sarah.”

“Huh? I was only trying to correct Sarah’s mistakes.”

“Don’t try to trick me. If you keep harassing Sarah, I’ll be your opponent.”

Melissa spoke with an arrogant tone but I could tell she had the skill to back up those words.

“–tch, fine!”

After a brief moment of silence, it was Daniel that backed down. He made no attempt to hide his discontent as he turned away from Melissa.

He turned and began to walk away, but he stopped just behind me.

“I hate people that think they can gain whatever they want using their money. Don’t start thinking you can get away with whatever you want in this guild.”

He left me with these words as he walked away.

Then, Melissa turned her eyes to me.

"Now then, are you okay? Did you not need my help?"

"Now, I was hoping to not stand out so you really saved me. Thanks."

I bowed my head to her and Sophia and Alice did the same.

"I see. That's good. Then we'll be going."

Melissa said this and tried to leave with Max. I quickly called out to her before she could leave.

"Ah, please wait a moment. Would you let me buy dinner for both of you?"

"Eh, you want to buy us a meal?"

"Oi, Melissa, you still have to complete your report about the last client."

"Ah~, that's right. We have to go complete that, so no need to worry about thanking us."

"I see."

I wanted to talk with them about the Lyk Skull Bear.... Well, if they have business they need to take care of, it can't be helped. We waved goodbye to them as they walked further into the guild.

After they disappeared from sight, I turned back to Sarah. The young girl that doesn't listen to other people's words silently bowed her head.

"...what's wrong?"

"No...umm, you told Melissa you didn't want to stand out."

"Oh, yeah. I came here to inspect the guild and put a request in for a certain material. I didn't want to turn any adventurers into my enemies."

"Guild...inspection? I-I'm very sorry!"

Sarah suddenly bowed her head deeply causing her chestnut coloured ponytail to whip forward.

"Umm...what's wrong?"

"I did all of that earlier without first hearing why you were here."

"Yeah, that's true."

"Hau~. A-Aren't you supposed to say, "that's not the case."

"No, you kept pushing forward and never took a second to listen to my words."

"Hauu~.... B-But that is true. I made a mistake.... That may be the case, but please don't report me to the guild."

She must be worried after I said I was here for an inspection.

"It'll be fine. Leon knows just how hard you were trying."

"Yeah, yeah, Leon onii-chan is kind."

Alice and Sophia tried to reassure her. Sarah heard this and looked up at me with an expression of anxiety mixed with expectation.

"They're right, you don't have to worry. I don't plan on saying anything bad about you to the guild. Of course, you should still try to listen to what other people are saying."

I think she went too far but she did know a little about our fighting power... and she did that to stop Daniel from sexually harassing her.

"I really am sorry. I sometimes forget myself. It's because I'm like this that the Marquis of Gramp abandoned me and assigned me to the guild."

"Hm? He abandoned you but assigned you to the guild."

I don't think that sounds right.

The guild was important to Crane so I highly doubt he'd assign someone here that he didn't think he could count on.

"All of the children that the Marquis favours are sent to the academy. There's a rumour that the only way to join his harem is to be first sent to the academy."

"...you want to join his harem?"

"Well, my future will be secure if I join the harem."

"I-I see...."

But, Sarah is a big-breasted loli that fits perfectly in with the Marquis' tastes.

But if what she said about the academy is true, could it be that he really doesn't like her personality? She can be a little stubborn, but she doesn't seem like a bad girl.

"Uuu, I'm really no good."

"Well, the guild is important for this town. I think that if you do well here, you're future will be very secure."

"That's true but...if I join his harem, I could spend the rest of my life living in luxury and never working."

...so it really is about her personality. However, it seems like we won't be able to continue if I just remain silent.

"I understand the desire to live a leisure-filled life but will you do your job for me today?"

"– Right. Umm...Leo-san, you didn't come here to register so that must mean you have a request?"

"Yes, I do, but this place is a little public. Is there somewhere else we can go?"

"Sure. We can head over to the cafe. There are a few rooms there we can use."

Sarah said this and went to the back room.

I could hear her tell someone, "I'm going to go handle this request, can you take over at the desk?" She then came back out and exited from behind the counter.

"Sorry for the wait. Allow me to show you around, Master."

"...why are you calling me 'master?'"

"I also work at the cafe."

After saying this, she guided me to the next door building that was also connected to the guild. I was already expecting it after she said 'cafe' and 'master,' but the building we entered was filled with big-breasted lolis that were dressed as maids.

The name of this cafe was ‘Mountains.’ There were many ordinary citizens as well as adventurers gathered here.

I don’t think I can take much more of this place.

Anyway, the room we entered was sectioned off by partitions. I sat across from the receptionist Sarah and we each ordered drinks.

“So then, Leo-san, what kind of request did you have?”

“Ah, actually –”

I told her that I needed the liver of a Lyk Skull Bear and gave her a brief overview of why I needed it.

“The liver of a Lyk Skull Bear? Do you know that they’re a rare mutation of the Garu Bear?”

“Yeah. I’ve heard that one is born for every several hundred Garu Bears.”

“I see. It hasn’t been that long since the guild was founded, but no one has ever brought in any materials from a Lyk Skull Bear. I’ve heard that it’s incredibly rare.”

Sophia nervously grabbed my sleeve after Sarah spoke. I turned to her in order to calm her nerves.

“It’s fine. They may not have brought in anything from a Lyk Skull Bear in the past year, but they haven’t been actively looking for one.”

I may be acting a little optimistic but I really don’t think the chances of us finding one are zero. That’s why I stroked Sophia’s fluffy blonde hair.

“...Leon onii-chan. Thank you.”

“How much should the reward be for a request like this?”

I continued stroking Sophia’s head as Alice asked Sarah this.

“Well, let’s see.... I think for a rare material like that, thirty silver coins should cover it.”

“That’s...cheap, isn’t it?”

A single gold coin is equal to one hundred silver coins. Thirty silver coins is about the same as one or two months salary of a farmer.

However, considering how rare this Lyk Skull Bear is supposed to be, that price seems quite low.

"The Garu Bear's liver is commonly used in medicines, but the Lyk Skull Bear is primarily used for its exquisite golden fur and its delicious meat. There's not much demand for their livers."

"...hmm."

I'm surprised to hear that.

The leaves of the world tree are also an ingredient in the cure but they're quite expensive because they have multiple uses. Is there really no other use for the Lyk Skull Bear's liver?

"It'll be thirty silver coins.... Leon, what do you want to do?"

"Let's see...."

Alice's question returned me to my senses, and then I turned my attention to Sarah.

"If I also wanted an equal amount of meat, how much would that cost?"

"Umm...let's see. The meat is considered to be one of a kind so, for a similar amount as the liver, it would cost fifty silver coins."

"Then, I'll put a request up for three gold coins in exchange for the liver. I don't care how much of it they bring, I only need a small amount."

"Eh!? That's ten times the normal price!"

"That's true. But aren't Lyk Skull Bears quite large? There will be plenty of meat on them and I wouldn't want the adventurers to toss it aside if they can't carry it all."

If the meat is worth more, I wouldn't want them to take as much meat with them as they could and leave the liver behind. If I were to pay the normal price, they'd stand to make more money by just taking another piece of meat and forego the reward for the liver.

"If that's what you want, I'll post the request. By the way, should the client be...the Earl of Grances?"

"Ah, no...you can just put Leo."

I still need to be careful about Patrick. I may just be acting overly cautious, but I wouldn't want him seeing my name and harassing whoever picks up the request.

"I think that's everything. I'll submit a request for the liver of a Lyk Skull Bear with a reward of three gold coins under the name 'Leo.' But to finalize the request, I'll need an advanced payment...."

"Ah, right. I'll pay it in full now. I'm not sure when the request will be fulfilled, but can you receive it if I'm not here?"

"Of course."

"Also...I've never seen this liver before, so...."

"Rest assured, the guild is able to confirm whether or not anyone trying to fulfil a request is lying. There's very little chance that the item they bring in will be received if it's not exactly what the requester wanted. They would also suffer penalties if anyone attempted this."

"I see. That's good."

The request of the guild has now been completed. I can leave everything else to them at this point.

If there's no progress, I'll have to consider raising the reward or going out to search on my own. For the time being, I still need to go inspect the academy.

The academy designed entirely by Crane. I have a bad feeling....

Chapter 13: The True Young Girl

The last condition for us to obtain the Earth Dragon's claw was to inspect the academy. So, the day after our visit to the Guild, we visited Vesta Academy located in the heart of the Marquis of Gramp's territory.

We decided it would be inefficient for us to all inspect the academy together so we split up. Alice and Sophia entered the academy ahead of me. Alice would be in charge of inspecting the quality of the uniforms, Sophia would inspect anything related to cooking, and I would do a general inspection of the entire academy starting with the classrooms. However, before I could even start, I was surprised to see Crane and the Marquis of Full-Flat here.

"...what are you two doing here?"

"The academy is an important place necessary to properly train young girls. I wanted to hear your thoughts firsthand while you were doing your inspection, and Owen felt the same."

"Oh...is that so?"

The war to decide which is true justice between big-breasted young girls and flat-chested girls has been concluded and now these two old men seem to be friends again. They've sandwiched me in between them and started walking forward towards the school. I wish they had never come.

I just want to get this over quickly.

It seems I was mistaken. While walking through the halls of the school, Crane and Owen began arguing once more about which of their favourite type of girls holds true justice.

"Stop, stop. Why are you two fighting again? I thought we had already settled this argument?"

I pushed myself between them and said this.

"Certainly, that disparity is glorious."

"Then why..."

"However! That may be a wonderful thing, but it's only natural that we would have to decide if a big-breasted loli or a flat-chested one is more likely to show this disparity!"

Ah...so they noticed. I would've been happy if they never noticed.

"Well, I'm going to start my inspection. You two can stay here and continue arguing."

I tried to escape but a firm grip on my shoulder prevented me from leaving.

'Wait a moment. Have you forgotten our deal? It was part of our agreement that you'd help end this dispute between myself and Owen.'

"I believe that was already settled. Any further disputes that occur after aren't my concern."

"Oi, oi, don't act like you're no longer involved. We agreed that I'd hand over the claw to you if you helped end this dispute. But if you no longer wish to keep your part of the agreement, then...."

Crane was looking at me with a smile, but his words were in stark contrast to his expression. But, even if I allow them to continue arguing here, nothing will be resolved.

"...I understand, but I should finish my inspection first."

For now, I'll just postpone the issue. It would be nice if they just forgot all about this.... With this fleeting thought in mind, we headed to our first destination.

We entered the first classroom.

I wanted to observe the natural setting of the classes here, but...the moment we entered, the atmosphere in the classroom changed.

Well...Crane, the lord of this town, and the Marquis of Full-Flat just entered the room. And I, the founder of the Muhle Academy, was quietly standing behind them.

The students are unsure of what to do.

The teacher, who appeared to be a graduate from Muhle, desperately tried to continue teaching normally. She was clearly nervous but she managed to continue the lesson somehow.

"It's my first time visiting one of the classrooms.... Despite how nervous they are, they're all trying desperately to continue the lesson normally. This scene alone would make building a school worthwhile."

"I agree. I can't stand that they're all big-breasted lolis, but the situation is nice on its own."

I overheard the quiet whispers of Crane and Owen as I observed the girls in the class. However, we were standing behind them. I could see the chests of a few girls, and they did appear to be large, but I couldn't tell if they were all that way.

How can Owen tell that they all have large chests just by looking at their backs? No, that really doesn't matter....

"...Crane, I don't care about your hobbies, but shouldn't education be the main focus here?"

"Don't worry. This class is a special class filled with girls that match my preferences. There are various types of students in the other classes."

"Ah, I see...."

Then, I guess it's fine. No, I really just don't want to hear any more.

By the way, the Marquis of Full-Flat said, "I'll make a class filled with girls suited to my tastes when I build my academy!" You're missing the point entirely!

"So, what do you think, Leon?"

This is a crime — I forced myself to hold back that comment and said, "I think it looks fine. It's comparable to ours."

"That's... You're not just trying to flatter me, are you?"

I have no reason to flatter him. Those were my honest thoughts.

"I'm being honest. Obviously, the number of electives is inferior to ours, but

that problem will be solved once more students have graduated from Muhle.”

“I see.... No, that’s good to hear. It was worth having you come here to inspect the school.”

Even though he’s usually obsessing over young girls, I feel that Crane truly cares about his people. I let out a sigh of relief, feeling more confident that the Marquis would responsibly manage the academy.

...but it will all be pointless if he won’t stop obsessing over big-breasted lolis.

“By the way, did you have anything else to say about my academy?”

“Well, Alice and Sophia are inspecting other aspects of the school, so we’ll have to hear from them later. Once the class is over, can I speak with the teacher?”

“Leon...just so you know, that teacher is mine as well.”

“That’s not what I meant! I just want to know if she’s faced any difficulties here that she didn’t in Muhle.”

Rather, I’m not a lolicon. She looks two or three years younger than Sophia.

Anyway, after the class had finished, we decided to speak with the teacher once the students had left.

“Leon-sama, it’s been a long time! Thank you for always looking after me during my time at Muhle Academy.”

However, before we could even speak to her, she ran up to me and bowed her head. The moment she did this, Crane cast a cold stare at me.

“...Leon? Have you forgotten what I said earlier?”

“I haven’t forgotten, so can you please let go of my shoulder?”

“...umm?”

The girl didn’t understand why Crane seemed upset as she curiously tilted her head.

Her chestnut hair was gleaming from the light shining through the window. She was an ideal big-breasted loli that perfectly suited Crane’s tastes.... But she still loses out to Sophia.

"There's nothing for you to worry about. Are there any challenges you've faced here that you didn't at the academy in Muhle?"

"That's...."

The girl looked over at Crane.

"It's fine. If there's anything you can think of, tell him. This is all so we can improve the academy."

"Then...I wouldn't say it's a challenge, more so an inconvenience. There are no foot baths or hot springs in this city."

"What is a 'foot bath'?"

Crane and the Marquis of Full-Flat turned to me.

I didn't expect Owen to know, but I'm surprised Crane doesn't. There should've been one in the place he was staying in Muhle, but maybe he only ever entered the hot spring.

Hot springs are nice, but foot baths create an entirely different sensation. What a waste that he was never able to experience it.

"A foot bath is exactly what it sounds like. A bath in which you only soak your feet."

I began explaining what a foot bath is to them.

"Only your feet? What's the point of doing that?"

"There are many reasons. It helps remove shoulder stiffness and relieves stress by stabilizing the autonomic nervous system. It also helps activate cells that suppress cancer and pollinosis."

"I-Is that so?"

"Yes. Foot baths are wonderful! There are many other amazing effects but we don't have the time to go through them all right now. If you want to know more later, I'd be happy to tell you."

"Uh, sure. I'm still not sure I understand, but I can tell how much you like them."

Crane suddenly looked as if he realized something momentous.

"A foot bath.... Hot springs...ah!? A place to legally bathe with young girls!"

"No, no, no, mixed bathing may be a thing, but they'd still be wearing something to cover themselves with."

"What are you saying! Do you not understand what bathing is!? A private space for you to relax and reveal who you truly are. In other words, it doesn't matter if they're wearing clothes or not!"

...he sounds like Alice.

"I understand that you recommend foot baths, but...there are no hot springs near here."

"– Dig one."

"..eh?"

"Dig up a hot spring. It doesn't matter how much it costs, I'll cover the expenses."

"Eeeeh...?"

I'd still like to show this town just how amazing foot baths are, but, now that I think about it, digging a hot spring isn't an easy thing to do.

There's a mountain nearby, but we'd have to do a geological survey to find a hot spring. How did we make them in Muhle?

I spoke with Alice about having hot springs in Muhle.... A few days passed and we then had hot springs.

"I feel like we'll be able to do it if we ask Alice."

"Oh, I'll have to ask her."

"And, depending on the geology, I'll try to spread the glory of foot baths through this town."

I held out my hand to Crane and he eagerly shook it. The Marquis of Full-Flat then broke up our handshake.

"Leon! It's unfair if Crane is the only one to get a hot spring! Dig a hot spring in my territory too!"

Does he want to bathe legally with girls that badly...? Of course he does. Do I have a moral responsibility to ensure he never is able to create a hot spring?

I'm not sure. For the time being, I should find out whether or not it's even possible.

"Umm...is there a mountain nearby?"

"My territory is almost entirely plains."

"Then it's probably impossible."

"What!?"

"If there are no mountain near, it will be impossible to find any volcanic hot springs. We could still find non-volcanic hot springs, but in order to do that, we'd have to dig nearly a thousand meters."

I can't remember for sure, but non-volcanic hot springs are only located that far down. Even the Alice cheat would have difficulty digging that far down.

"Impossible.... The gloriously flat plains covering my territory have become my enemy."

The Marquis of Full-Flat suddenly lowered his head.

"Hahahaha, that's too bad, Owen! But just like with young girls, having mountains in your territory is better than plains!"

Hey! Now he's just trying to start an argument! I let out a scream inside my mind, and I intended on stopping Crane, but it was too late.

"How ridiculous! Maybe we can't have hot springs, but my land is better in every other way!"

"Don't be absurd! The quality of the land is in no way related to a young girl's chest!"

...but it was you who first said they were related, Crane. I wanted to comment, but even as I sighed the argument between them intensified.

Unnoticed to them, the young teacher was slowly tiptoeing away from us. As expected of a Muhle Academy alumnus, she's quite formidable.... Well, those

two may have no connection.

"A girl with true disparity can only exist in big-breasted lolis. That is the only true justice!"

"What a stupid thing to say! A true young girl is as flat as a board!"

...is this all they're concerned about? I'm starting to get angry.

"If this is all about disparity, isn't the most impactful one flat-chested girls?"

The moment I said this, Crane froze.

"What was that...Leon? Are you trying to say flat-chested girls are...true justice?"

"No, just think about it. When you say 'flat-chested girl' you picture the pure, innocent image of a young girl. But when you say 'big-breasted loli' you already picture something perverted."

"That definitely seems true — no way!"

"Exactly. If we're talking about who shows the greatest disparity, it's obviously flat-chested girls."

"H-Hahahaha, did you hear that, Crane!? Flat is true justice!"

"Ridiculous —"

After hearing my words, the Marquis of Full-Flat gave voice to his victory, and Crane collapsed to his knees. I put my hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

"Crane, the disparity is more evident in flat-chested girls. However, the more perverted one is definitely big-breasted girls."

"That...may be true, but the disparity...."

"Just because the disparity is higher, that's not necessarily a good thing. It's entirely possible a flat-chested girl is just as pure and innocent inside as she appears to be. The large chests of big-breasted lolis create disparity right from the start."

"O-Oh...that's true, Leon!"

It seems I've restored his faith in big-breasted lolis. Crane stood up in an

instant and Owen was now the one looking dissatisfied.

“I’ve been listening to you two argue this entire time.”

I’m not a lolicon. So if you were to ask me which is better, flat-chested girls or big-breasted lolis, I would have to say I don’t care.

However, there is one thing that I do know.

“The question you asked before, who is the true young girl. The answer to me is quite obvious. Isn’t Sophia the cutest!?”

Even someone like me that isn’t a lolicon is attracted to her. There’s no doubt in my mind that Sophia is true justice.

“Wha—!? D-Don’t be ridiculous! Certainly, Lady Sophia is a fantastic example of a big-breasted loli. However, that doesn’t mean she’s the cutest!”

“Both of you are wrong for assuming a big-breasted loli could ever be the cutest! Only a flat-chested loli could ever hold that title! And who are you to decide the cutest!?”

“This is no longer a question involving big-breasted lolis or flat-chested ones! Sophia is a brave young girl that loves her brother, and she’s even cute on the inside!”

“If that’s all, then the same can be said for Lori!”

“The same goes for my Pettan! I could praise her all day long until my stomach hurts!”

Ku, neither of them understands. Sophia is without a doubt the cutest. It can’t be helped. I’ll just have to explain to them how she’s superior to all other lolis.

“There’s more to Sophia’s cuteness. When I first met her, she was shy and barely spoke to me. But as we’ve spent more time together, she’s opened up and began to talk more –”

I couldn’t finish telling them about Sophia’s cuteness. I could feel someone behind me staring at this ridiculous scene.

“Leon onii-chan...what’s going on?”

An emotionless voice called out to me. With a terrible sense of dread, I turned

around...and saw Sophia looking back at me.

"S=Sophia, have you finished your inspection?"

"What's going on here, Leon onii-chan?"

"T-This is...we're just having a small chat."

"...a small chat? What kind of 'small chat' would involve talking about...me...."

Sophia started trembling and I unintentionally held my breath. Then, Sophia's face, which was neutral until now, suddenly became a deep shade of scarlet.

"S-Sophia?"

"Hey...Leon, onii-chan. Did you forget about my ability? I know exactly what you were talking about."

"— W-Wait! Calm down! I was just trying to tell them how cute you were!"

"...you know, Leon onii-chan, it's one thing to talk about how cute I am, but it's embarrassing if you start openly telling everyone about my childhood.... Do you understand?"

"I-I understand! Umm...next time, I'll be careful, so if you can just forget this...."

Before I could even finish talking, Sophia quickly moved towards me. It caused my heart to seize in my chest. She stood directly in front of me, and —

"Onii-chan, you idiot –!"

I felt a savage strike hit my stomach and my consciousness slowly faded away.

By the way, after I was beaten by Sophia, the argument between Owen and Crane seemed to have been settled. After witnessing Sophia's actions, they both said something about 'gap moe.'

That's good. It's good but....

After that, Sophia didn't say anything.

Chapter 14: Watch Your Back

The conditions for receiving the claw from the Marquis of Gramp were to end his dispute with the Marquis of Full-Flat and inspect the academy and guild.

Although their argument was still up for debate, it appeared to be settled for now, and I had given my report about the guild and academy to Crane. As things stood, the claw was now mine. The only thing left to peacefully do was to wait for the adventurers to return with the liver.

— that's what I should be doing.... However, the next day, I was sulking in the Marquis of Gramp's guest room.

"Sophia.... Sophia hasn't spoken to me since yesterday!"

"That seems only natural after what happened."

Alice was as merciless as always.

She's been in a bad mood ever since she found out I told Crane and Owen that Sophia was the cutest girl.

Of course, I just meant she was the cutest among other young girls. That doesn't mean she's the cutest in every other sense.

But...I didn't expect Alice to be so jealous.

I gently stroked Alice's head to reassure her.

"Why did you even have to say anything? You know there's no point in arguing with people about stuff like that."

"I'm sorry, but I was stuck listening to those two arguing for so long. I held back for as long as I could, but I just couldn't stop myself."

"I can understand that. But I still think it was wrong for you to bring up Sophia's childhood."

"I just wanted them to understand why I thought she was cute."

"Oh, is that all? So you'd be okay with it if I brought up something from your childhood that I think is cute?"

"There's.... There's nothing I would hate if you brought up."

"Not even a story from Yuya's childhood? I remember all your grand delusions. There was a time when you kept telling me of a great and powerful spirit sealed away in your eye –"

"I'm very sorry!"

I was wrong and had no excuse for what I did.

"If you realize you were wrong you should be apologizing to her not me."

"I want to apologize to her, but she won't speak to me!"

"Hmm~, that's true. Sophia is interested in the local cuisine, you could try inviting her out to eat."

"...that might work. Then the three of us –"

Before I was able to finish, Alice shook her head.

"I need to start searching for a hot spring for the Marquis of Gramp. You two can just go on your own. Also, there are other things you need to say to her, right?"

"...you noticed?"

"After all, we're lovers."

Even though she was jealous just a moment ago, she's still as kind as ever.

Alice's smiling face, framed by her cherry blossom hair was as cute as always, but it still made me feel bad.

However, Sophia is my focus now.

"Thank you, Alice. I'm indebted to you once again. And if you have to go up into the mountains, please take an escort with you."

"Of course~"

A bright smile appeared on her face.

"...why are you so happy?"

"Fufu, it's nothing~"

"It doesn't seem like it's nothing."

"It's absolutely nothing. Even though you're so worried about Sophia, you're still worried about my safety. I'm just happy that you're thinking about me."

Her cheeks were dyed a colour resembling her hair.

The fact that she's happy over something so simple is really cute to me. I'd like to go with her but right now Sophia takes precedence.

I thanked Alice and left to find Sophia.

I arrived at Sophia's room and knocked on her door.

"...Sophia, it's Leon. Can I come in?"

There was no reply.

Well, even when I came here for breakfast this morning she completely ignored me. I'm guessing she's still mad.

"Sophia, I'm really sorry about yesterday. I was annoyed after listening to them argue for.... No, I'm not going to make any excuses. I was wrong."

But there was no reply. I'll at least try to convey my honest feelings to her.

"It's true that I think you're cute and you're an important person to me and that's why I hate fighting like this. It may just be me being selfish, but...I want you to forgive me."

I thought she was cute when we first met, but back then, I thought of her as my sister and never once looked at her as anything more.

But more recently, Sophia has matured and become even cuter. She's growing into a beautiful woman and there's no way I can purely look at her as a sister figure anymore.

Alice forgave me once when she was ignoring me. If I acknowledge Sophia as more than just a sister, she might forgive me.

I hate fighting like this. I absolutely can't have this fight continue and have one of us die like with Saya.

"Would you like to go out to dinner this afternoon? It will be just the two of us."

I waited for her response but heard nothing back. I turned to walk away from her door after saying, “You can give me your answer later.”

After leaving her room, I went to the dining room to get something to drink but was met with something I was surprised to see.

Seated at one of the tables in the corner, Sophia and Milli were happily talking to each other.

By the way, there's only a single hallway connecting Sophia's room to the dining room. In other words, it would be impossible for Sophia to leave her room from the entry door and make it here without passing me. So this must mean....

She jumped out of her window and ran ahead of me to get here first.

...of course not.

I just have to admit it. Sophia was never in her room. All I managed to do was convey my feelings to a door.

...uwaaa~! That's so embarrassing! I want to die!

“...Leon onii-chan, what are you doing?”

At some point, Sophia had walked up next to me as I was hiding my face out of embarrassment.

“I-it's nothing! Rather, if you're having tea, can I join you?”

“...you can do whatever you like.”

Sophia turned away from me with a, “Hmph,” and walked back to her table. I was just glad she didn't reject me. I sat down opposite her.

“Sophia, you know, I really am sorry about yesterday –”

“–Milli okaa-san.”

As I tried to apologize, Sophia cut me off to speak with Milli.

“Is it okay if I go out to eat dinner in the town today?”[Sophia]

“Of course.”[Milli]

As usual, those two are on really good terms. Do they go out to eat dinner often? As I thought about this, Sophia turned to me.

“I’m interested in the local restaurants.”

Eh? Oh...you are? So are you planning to go out to eat with Milli?”

I thought this was her plan but she looked unhappy.

“...Leon onii-chan, are you properly reflecting on your actions yesterday?”

“Eh? Oh, of course.”

“If you go out with me, I’ll forgive you.”

“...eh? Are you sure?”

“Are you saying you don’t want to go out with me?”

“Of course not. I’d love to.”

“—I-If you want to go so bad, I guess I have no choice.”

Sophia suddenly stood up from her seat.

“...Sophia?”

“I have to go get ready. We’ll be leaving in an hour.”

Sophia walked around the table and ran out of the room. Why did it look like her face was red?

“Milli...is Sophia still mad at me?”

“Hmm, who knows. I wouldn’t say she’s angry, but I can give you advice on one thing....”

Milli’s expression resembled the same one she had made countless times during my childhood; her purple eyes shimmering. Then, she said something while trying not to laugh.

“When apologizing to someone through a door, it might be best to make sure they’re actually inside.”

“.....umm, why do you know about that, Milli?”

I've got a bad feeling. There's cold sweat running down my back.

"I was walking down the hallway with Sophia when we saw you. She wanted to follow you."

"And that's when...."

"Sophia was standing not far from you as you gave your apology."

"Nwaaaaaaa!?"

They both saw me apologizing to a door! What kind of shame play is this!? I don't think I'll ever be able to look Sophia in the face again!

"Is that why Sophia asked me out to eat a little while ago?"

"She made up her mind after hearing your apology. Originally, she chased after you to apologize because she felt bad for ignoring you all day yesterday. But it seems that you apologized before she could."

"So it was like that."

In other words, just now, Sophia couldn't be honest so she made up an excuse to end our fight and get a date with me. Isn't that the cutest thing!?

I wonder if it was obvious what I was thinking. When I looked over at Milli, she was staring at me with a faint smile on her face.

"...Leon, I've noticed Sophia has been acting strange recently. Have you noticed?"

"Yeah, I have. I've noticed but...as long as she's not hurting herself, I think it's cute that she's trying so hard."

"It's fine as long as you know.... Just make sure you never talk about how she used to pout and how shy she was when she was a kid."

"Of course, I can show at least that much self-restraint."

— probably.

Chapter 15: My Promise to Sophia

As the sun sat high in the sky, Sophia and I casually walked through the city streets. It was a perfect day for a walk but it seemed like a dark cloud hung over Sophia.

"There's something I wanted to do before lunch, is it okay if we go together?"

When I asked her this, Sophia turned away and puffed out her cheeks. Without looking at me, she said, "You should do whatever you want, Leon onii-chan."

I brought Sophia to a newly built temple in the city of Vesta. The sunlight reflected brilliantly off the stained glass, creating a magnificent scene.

"It's quite beautiful, don't you think? Crane told me about it."

I looked back at her but she still remained silent. She actually looked annoyed that I even said anything.

"...Sophia?"

"Nu~nu~nu~. Why are you acting like everything's okay, Leon onii-chan?"

"...oh, it's about that. I guess I haven't apologized properly yet. I'm really sorry for what happened yesterday."

I tried to bow my head to her but Sophia groaned before I could.

"Mouuuuu~, it's not like that. You apologized to me earlier but I still haven't apologized to you. Why are you forgiving me so easily!?"

Ah...that's what this is about.

I still didn't think I had apologized yet, but it seems Sophia had already accepted my apology (soliloquy).

"It's fine. You don't have anything to apologize for."

As I gently stroked her fluffy blonde hair, her eyes opened wide in shock.

"...what? But I punched you."

"Well, I definitely didn't expect that from you."

Even if she was mad about what I said, that was the first time she ever hit me. I was more than a little surprised when it happened.

But that wasn't because I was surprised to see Sophia using violence. It was due to the fact that I didn't realize how emotionally unstable she was at that time.

"I made you a promise. I will help Elyse, so don't worry like that."

"...eh?"

"I know you're pretending not to worry but you don't need to do that with me."

Sophia smiled and thanked me for gathering the ingredients, but was also worried about having me help her mother. She was starting to think it would all be too much for her.

I bet she feels like I'm only helping Elyse for her.

"...Leon onii-chan, you noticed."

"Because it's about you, Sophia. I don't need to have your ability to understand how you feel."

Sophia's mother is suffering from an incurable disease, and yet, Claire brought us all to a lake to play and Alice was hoping something eventful would happen at the Guild. Why would they do this when Sophia is so worried?

The answer is simple. They can tell how worried she is. They were hoping they'd be able to lighten the mood, even if only just a little.

Well...I don't think everyone has been trying to help Sophia take her mind off things. Crane, for example, is just genuinely obsessed with big-breasted lolis.

"...that's right. Everyone always has to look after me."

"I don't think you need to feel bad about that. Actually...everyone wants to spoil you, so when there's something on your mind don't feel like you have to hold it inside."

"That's.... But my mother helped kill your parents."

"And I still came here to find ingredients for the medicine needed to cure

your mother. If I didn't want to be here, I wouldn't."

"I know.... I know, but that's just because you're so nice, Leon onii-chan! I know you're just forcing yourself to do this for me!"

So that's what she thinks.

"I'm not forcing myself. You can use your ability to tell that much."

"I said I only use it when I think it's really necessary."

"...isn't it necessary now?"

"I think I want to know how you really feel."

"Then, you'll need to read my heart."

I want her to stop using it for mischief. But I'm okay with her using it now if it means she'll feel less anxious.

These were my honest feelings, but...Sophia shook her head.

"...if you're hiding your true intentions and just doing this for me, I don't want to use my ability to find out."

"I see...."

In other words, she doesn't want to use her ability in order to feel like she can trust me. I'm glad that she feels this way.

I'm happy to see her growing. I'll tell her my honest feelings so she can tell how I really feel.

"From the bottom of my heart, I want you to make up with Elyse."

"Really? You'd be okay with that? You're not just saying that because you know it's what I want?"

"It's okay. You don't need to worry. Why are you doubting me so much?"

"Because...I regret killing Father, I regret hurting Mother.... I absolutely don't want to hurt you."

...really, Sophia.

I guess she's aware that everyone wants to spoil her. She really is so cute and kind. When it comes to helping Sophia, I would never feel like I'm forcing myself.

"I could never hate you. I can't say how Elyse feels but ever since I told you I'd help cure her, you've been smiling so much more."

If I left Elyse to eventually die from her disease I could maybe feel like my revenge was complete. However, I don't think Sophia would ever recover. I can't let that happen.

If I save Elyse, I won't be happy about the act, but I know Sophia will be pleased. And that's what I want more than anything.

So it's an obvious choice for me.

"I also want you and Elyse to make up for my own personal reasons, so I will definitely cure Elyse."

With this as a preface, I took out the gothic hair ornament Akane had given me before we left and attached it to Sophia's hair.

"...Leon onii-chan, what is this?"

"It's a hair ornament. I thought it would go well with your gothic dress."

"That's not what I meant.... Are you giving it to me?"

"Of course, it's a gift.... By the way, I only give accessories to girls that are important to me."

"Fueeh!? L-Leon onii-chan, that's...."

Sophia became red the instant I said this and I swore I could see steam rising from her head.

She looked at me with an expression filled with expectation and anxiety. I looked straight into her eyes and said,

"I like you, Sophia."

"...in the same way you like Alice onee-chan?"

"To be honest...it's similar but also different."

"Of course. I'm just a little sister to you."

Sophia misunderstood my words, so I quickly tried to make things clear.

"I want our relationship to be unique to us. It may be different than my relationship with Alice but, as a man, I like you."

"Umm...what does that mean?"

"...let's see. I like Alice as a girl that can walk side-by-side with me and I like you as a girl that I want to protect."

I don't need to say this now but I like Claire because of how dependable she is. Those are my honest feelings.

"Then...does that mean you like me, Leon onii-chan?"

"Isn't that what I said?"

"You...do...."

Sophia blushed and placed her hands on her cheeks, but I still have more to say.

"Hey, Sophia. I can't exclusively be with you but I want to ask you to only be with me. I know it's selfish but I want to know if you're okay with that."

"That's...fine. Of course, because I like you, Leon."

Sophia closed her eyes and slightly stuck out her lips. I grabbed Sophia by the shoulders and kissed her on the cheek.

"...Leon...onii-chan?"

"An actual kiss will have to wait until you've grown up a little more."

Sophia will be thirteen this year. Comparing her to Japanese girls, she'd be around sixteen or seventeen. Although, she actually appears a little younger.

In this world, I'm already old enough to get married. I'm a little reluctant to kiss a girl on the lips when she's not old enough for that.

"...hmm~, Leon onii-chan, my hair ornament seems like it's about to fall off."

"Oh, sorry. Did I put it on wrong?"

The moment I leaned down to look at it, Sophia wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me forward.

“Uwaa!? What are you –!?”

She caught me off guard so I couldn’t resist. She pulled down on my neck even harder and I had to step to her side to avoid falling on top of her.

And at that moment,

“–Ei!”

She stepped forward and swept my other leg off the ground. I couldn’t do anything to stop her as my back hit the ground with Sophia still clinging tight to me.

Sophia straddled me as she leaned forward and brought her face close to mine.

“–nn~.... Ehehe~, that was my first kiss.”

“W-Wha–!?”

“Ehe~, Leon onii-chan, your face is red.”

“T-That’s not....”

There’s no way I can remain calm when a girl that I’m attracted to just kissed me.

I told her to wait until she’s grown up, not act more adult — Sophia smiled as if she were reading my feelings.

“I’ll be old enough to get married this year.”

“I-I know that.”

“So that means it’s okay for me to do stuff that you do with Alice onee-chan.”

“– buu!?”

I did my best to not show a reaction but I couldn’t stop myself.

“You know, Leon onii-chan, Sophia is ready whenever you are. If you ever want to be honest with yourself, I’m ready at any time, Leon onii-chan.”

“O-Okay...I-I understand.”

I could tell my face had become redder than Sophia's. She's become even more corrupted by those two than I'd imagined. She seems more mature than them at this point.

I need to get a grip. And I also now realize that I need to do a better job protecting Sophia.

I got up off the ground and then looked back down at Sophia.

"...*cough* anyway, I'll definitely help you reconcile with Elyse. After all, if I don't, I won't be allowed to be with you."

"Fueh?"

"Don't you think she'd object to us being together? I'll earn her favour and get her to accept our relationship."

That's not necessarily the truth. Sophia has been adopted into the Grances family, so there wouldn't be any issues if Elyse objected.

However, it would be nice if Sophia had her mother's blessing. That's what I truly want.

"– thank you, Leon onii-chan!"

"– whoa."

Sophia jumped up and wrapped her arms around me. She looked up at me with a bright smile. That's the best smile I've seen from her.

...yep. After all, Sophia's the cutest when she's smiling. While thinking this, I lightly hugged Sophia back.

We then left the temple and continued our walk through the town.

Under the clear blue sky, Sophia happily clung onto my arm before her expression suddenly hardened.

"...is something wrong?"

"Umm...I hit you yesterday. Are you bruised anywhere?"

"Don't worry. I was able to defend myself."

Well, she easily punched straight through my defence...but I obviously wasn't going to say that.

I casually changed the subject by asking her, "Where there any stores you wanted to visit around here?"

"Ah, well, there are some restaurants built in the redeveloped areas that I'm interested in."

"Oh, new restaurants.... Is the food there good?"

For a brief moment, what happened when Sophia and I visited Wells Clothing Shop flashed through my mind.

Because Sophia was interested in the store, I allowed her to go without thinking much about it. But that shouldn't happen with food.

"It's a shop that Sarah from the Adventurers Guild recommended so I think it should be fine~"

"Sarah-chan...."

She would know about the quality of meals at Muhle Academy and that Sophia is a good cook, and she still recommended this place....

"Besides, you don't need to worry. I just want to study new ingredients and different cooking methods. Even if the taste isn't what I'm used to, I won't complain."

"Okay then, let's go to the restaurant."

We walked for a few minutes before an old-fashioned shop came into view.

It looked like the building techniques from Muhle had been used to construct it, so it wasn't old but had been built to look like the older buildings. It was different from the Japanese style but it somehow looked nostalgic.

"There are more customers than I expected."

"Yeah, it's good that we didn't get here much later."

Sarah told Sophia that the shop was quite busy during the evening. If we got here any later, there may not have been any tables available.

"Welcome. A table for two...?"

A waitress that appeared to be in her mid-teens greeted us as we entered. However, once she saw our faces she fell silent.

“...is something wrong?”

“– no, please, excuse me. Take a seat at any of the open tables. I’ll be back to take your order in a moment.”

The waitress turned on her heel and hurried to the back of the shop. As we sat down at a table, I could see that the waitress kept turning to look back at us.

“What’s with this strange atmosphere?”

I thought it was just the waitress but I could see several other customers and staff staring at us. Their stares didn’t feel hostile, but they definitely weren’t welcoming.

“If you want, Leon onii-chan, I could use my benefit to find out.”

“...no, you don’t need to do that.”

If she did, her happy mood may be ruined and it’s not like I desperately need to know.

Sophia is trying to avoid using her benefits unless she absolutely has to, so I shouldn’t force her to use it for me when I’m slightly worried.

I decided not to worry about the stares and flipped through the menu.

The lunchtime menu had many different types of food. Most of them were based on a local cuisine from the village of Reiji. In the evening there were even more items available from this town, and the current menu also had ‘Local Cuisine from Reiji’ written at the top.

Is this restaurant sponsored by that village?

“Thank you for waiting. Are you ready to order?”

“Umm...I’ll have the A special. What about you, Sophia?”

“Hmm~ I’m not sure.... Can I try some of yours, onii-chan?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you! We can each try the different specials. I’ll take the B special.”

The second part she said to the waitress.

“— Certainly. One A special and one B. I’ll get those out to you as quickly as I can.”

She said this and left. Honestly, something seems off about her. What could it be?

As I thought this, I could feel an intense gaze coming from behind me. Right next to the table, a boy less than ten-years-old was staring at me.

“Oi, you!”

“...are you talking to me?”

I don’t think there’s anyone else he could be talking to but I asked anyway.

“You’re both nobles! Why are you in a place like this!?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that.... We heard that the food here was really good so we came here to eat.”

“Liar! You’ve come here to do something bad again!”

“...something bad?”

I turned to Sophia to see if she knew what he was talking about. The next moment —

“You killed my parents!”

The boy punched me across the face.

Chapter 16: A Wound that Won't Heal

I was caught off guard when he hit me but, seeing as he's just a small child, his punch didn't have much force behind it. I calmed down and caught the boy's next punch with my hand.

"Oi, what are you doing so suddenly?"

"Ku, you coward!"

The boy was only about as tall as me as I was sitting. Even if he put all of his strength into his punches, they wouldn't hit me.

It would be easy for me to hit him and put an end to this if I were a bad guy.... But this kid can't be older than ten and he's saying something about me killing his parents. As I was considering what to do, the waitress that had taken our orders came rushing from the back of the shop and pulled the boy away from me.

"What are you doing!? Stop, Rick!"

"Why are you stopping me, Remy onee-Chan!?"*

"It's because of people like them that Mother and Father are dead!"

"–Rick!"

The waitress' right hand whipped forward in an instant. Even from this distance, I could tell she held nothing back. The child named Rick was sent sprawling to the floor.

The dining area fell silent.

...umm, what's happening? I was the one that got hit and even I think that was a bit much....

"My Lord, I'm very sorry. He's just a stupid child that has no sense. Please, you only need to punish me!"

She knelt down and placed her forehead on the ground. I was immediately able to understand why she hit Rick so hard. She did it to protect him because they're both terrified of nobles.

“N-Nee-chan, what are you doing...?”

“Rick, you’re my responsibility. If you haven’t received a proper education, that’s my fault. Even if I’m taken away, you must never blame yourself.”

“...N-Nee-chan?”

Noticing how serious Remy’s tone had become, Rick’s face was dyed in fear.

“Umm, you said your name was Remy, right? Can you please raise your head?”

“...yes, my Lord.”

She slowly raised her head. I could tell by the look in her eyes that she was prepared for whatever punishment I’d give her.

She just seems like an ordinary village girl.... Something must have happened to them in the past. Her younger brother said nobles were responsible for their parents’ death.

That worries me...but I should first do something about Rick’s cheek. I took a handkerchief out of my pocket and moistened it with spirit magic.

But when I reached out towards the boy’s face, my intentions were completely misunderstood and he wouldn’t let me get close.

“–Sophia.”

“Sure, I got it.”

Sophia took the handkerchief from me and approached the boy.

Just like I thought, Remy and Rick looked nervous but didn’t avoid her.

Sophia is probably stronger than I am but people tend to let their guard down around her due to her appearance.

“Here. Hold this against your cheek.”

“...umm?”

“Use it to cool off your cheek.”

“It’s so cold! Wait, ow, that hurts! You’re being too rough!”

Sophia just gave up on explaining and pushed the cloth against Rick’s cheek.

That wasn't exactly how I wanted that to go.... It's possible Sophia's annoyed that Rick ruined the happy atmosphere we had going.

W-Well, I'm sure it'll be fine. Thinking this, I turned my attention back to Remy.

"Can you tell me what your brother meant earlier?"

"That's.... Yes, I understand."

Given the circumstances, Remy believed she couldn't refuse.

"Actually –"

"Wait. Can you take a seat at the table?"

"But –"

"It will be hard for us to talk if you remain kneeling."

She was hesitant at first – I could tell how scared she was – but just like before, she believed she couldn't refuse. Eventually, she finally pulled a chair up to the table and sat down.

"So, why does Rick hate aristocrats so much?"

"Umm, well...do you know about the famine that occurred a few years back?"

"Yes, I remember it."

That was when Alice and I really started abusing our domestic affairs cheat.

"Our hometown, Reiji, was destroyed by that famine."

"I see."

I can understand why Rick would hate nobles.

The famine severely affected many areas. The Marquis of Gramp's territory was heavily affected and every city and village in his territory was facing a food shortage.

Crane had to make a terrible decision. He chose to abandon several villages in order to save the rest.

Reiji village was one of those abandoned.

In order to save the many, a select few were sacrificed. From a political viewpoint, it isn't wrong...but when I'm looking at two of the victims of this decision, it's hard for me to believe that.

"I can understand that. It's unavoidable that he'd hate the nobility."

I understand, but that doesn't make it any easier to convince them I'm not their enemy. Whatever I say, Remy and Rick won't trust me.

I wonder what she thought was on my mind. Remy seemed to panic a little and continued.

"Umm, it's true that once the famine had passed, the Marquis of Gramp rescued the few survivors and explained the circumstances to us."

"...rescued?"

I asked her to explain to me, in detail, what she meant by this. She said the Marquis relocated the survivors from the abandoned villages to this city and helped them find jobs and places to live.

"This shop was given to us by the Marquis of Gramp. It's a place for the survivors of Reiji to live and work, but...."

Remy's words trailed off. When I asked what was wrong she said, "I-It's nothing."

Even if she says Crane rescued them, it doesn't change the fact that he abandoned them. Even though there were many circumstances that led to his decision, I don't expect any of the families affected would ever forgive him. I shouldn't pursue the subject any more.

"I...understand why that decision was made. I don't hold a grudge against any of the nobility. However, Rick is just a child. He only sees things in black and white. To him, the Marquis of Gramp decided that our parents didn't deserve to live. So, please, forgive him and punish me in his place."

"Uh, well...."

I never actually intended on punishing her.... How should I end this? I guess the simplest method would probably be quickest.

"It seems you were actually misunderstanding me. I'm not a nobleman."

“...eh? I-Is that true?”

“Yep, I’m just a traveller.”

“...just a traveller? I don’t see how that’s possible....”

Remy looked over at Sophia. She was wearing a gothic dress that was, of course, made from the highest quality material in this world.

...yep, no normal person would be we wearing that.

“Umm....”

“Leon onii-chan is just travelling. He’s actually retired.”

Sophia replied in my place.

“He looks rather young to be retired.”

Remy stated the obvious.

“Onii-chan just looks really young. He’s actually in his forties.”

— pff!? T-That was close. I was barely able to stop myself from reacting.

Over forty? No matter how you look at me, I don’t look — wait, if you include my previous life, that’s actually true.

And there are around eight years of time that passed after I died on Earth and when I was reborn here.

“...that...has to be a lie, right?”

“...only one part of what we’ve said is a lie.”

“Is that so?”

Although I’m technically the head of the Grances family, I’ve basically left all of the work for Claire. So it’s not incorrect to say I’ve retired.

And if I include my age in my previous life, I’m technically over forty.

So the only lie is the fact that we actually are nobles. However, Remy seemed convinced the lie was about my age.

"You don't have to believe it. The only thing you need to know is that I have no intention of punishing you."

"...thank you."

After that, Remy and Rick apologized to us several times. They offered to give us lunch for free to make up for the inconvenience.

We got caught up in a strange event but the local cuisine was really delicious. And Sophia seemed happy, so it was good that we came.

As we were eating lunch —

"— I finally found you!"

Alice, who was supposed to be out finding a hot spring, jumped into the restaurant with a shout.

"...Alice? What are you doing here?"

"Sophia-chan told me this was where she wanted to take you — that doesn't matter! I heard from a contact at the Guild that a Lyk Skull Bear has been sighted!"

"Oh, that's what this is about?"

That's good. I promised Sophia that I'd definitely save Elyse, but that would've been impossible if we couldn't find this bear. It's only a matter of time until we get the liver now.

However —

"We need to hurry to the Guild! We'll lose the liver if we stay here!"

The words that left Alice's mouth were not what I expected.

Chapter 17: Competition for the Request

Leaves of the World Tree can be found behind the academy and an earth dragon's claw is in Crane's possession, so the ingredient I was most worried about getting was the liver of the rare Lyk Skull Bear.

It seemed that the biggest problem was solved now that one had been found. However, Alice said we might lose the liver if we don't act fast.

I was worried about what she meant, but I decided to wait to ask her more until we were on our way to the Guild. We paid for our food and quickly left the restaurant.

"So, why are we in such a hurry? Even if the Lyk Skull Bear has been found, they haven't been able to hunt it yet, right?"

On our way to the Guild, I asked Alice this.

"We might be too late once they've hunted it."

"What does that mean?"

"It seems someone else has posted a request for a Lyk Skull Bear, but they wish to capture one alive."

"Alive...."

I can see why Alice said we have to hurry.

If they wanted it for its fur, we could easily just take the liver and let them have everything else. Even if they wanted the liver, we could split it and take only the amount we need.

However, this request is in direct competition of our own. They want to capture it alive for some reason which makes it impossible for us to get its liver.

"Hey, Alice onee-chan, which request do you think the adventurers will take? Will they take mine?"

"Sorry, Sophia. I don't know for sure but it doesn't sound good."

"I see...."

Sophia was running next to me and I could see an uneasy expression on her face. I placed my hand on her shoulder as we ran to reassure her.

"Don't worry. If the reward for the other request is good, we'll just have to increase our own. In any case, we need to hurry to the Guild."

We found our way to the Guild and spotted Sarah standing at the reception desk.

"Ah, Leo-san, did you hear that a Lyk Skull Bear has been spotted in the forest?"

"Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that. I heard that someone submitted a request in conflict with ours."

"Umm...that seems to be the case."

"It seems to be...?"

I wasn't sure what she meant.

"I've heard about that request but it seems it wasn't made through the Guild. I'm not sure about the exact details."

"Umm...is that illegal?"

"No, there's no law that states all requests have to be made through the Guild."

"I see...."

That makes sense when I think about it. The Guild was only just recently built, so there must have been a way they did it before.

"By the way, how many adventurers took up our request?"

"There was a group of two."

"If those adventurers manage to hunt it, they'll bring us the liver, right?"

"Yes. If they were planning on hunting it."

"...what does that mean?"

I felt that Sarah was implying something that I couldn't quite pick up on.

"There aren't many adventurers capable of hunting a Garu Bear, and when it

comes to hunting the mutated Garu Bear, it's really only those two that would be willing to hunt it. However, they've decided to capture it alive....”

“I see. So there are only two people willing to even take on our request and they've already decided to accept the other. In other words...if things stay like this, we won't get the liver.”

“There seems to be a few rank C adventurers that have considered taking on the request because of the reward, but I don't expect much from them.”

“Okay....”

Not good. I'd like to speak with the B rank adventurers that took the other request, but I can't even find out who posted the request or what exactly their request is.

Well, what should I do...?

“Umm, Leo-san? Would you like me to ask the adventurers that took the other request to hear what you have to say?”

“Eh, that would be a great help...but is it okay for you to do that?”

“Yes. I'll just be asking them to hear you out. I'll see if they're willing to listen. I'll be right back.”

Sarah said this and ran off before returning a few minutes later.

“– Sorry for the wait. They're currently eating now but plan on going into the forest later. They said they'd be willing to listen to you while they eat their meal.”

“I understand. That's good enough.”

“Well, then, I'll show you to them.”

Sarah guided us to a small cafe where I saw two familiar faces seated at one of the tables. Their names are...Max and Melissa. The adventurers that helped me out earlier.

“Oh, look who it is....”

“Hi, my name is Leo and this is Alice and Sophia. Thank you for your help the other day.”

I bowed my head to them and Sophia and Alice did the same.

"Leo-kun, Sophia-chan, and Alice-san. I'm Melissa and this is my partner Max."

"Melissa-san and Max-san, I'm sorry for interrupting your meal, but I wanted to speak with you."

"I don't mind as long as you stop speaking so formally and relax a little."

"All right.... I can do that."

For a moment, I was at a loss. I also dislike acting so formal so this works for me.

I also took a seat at their table. Due to there not being enough seats, Alice and Sophia had to stand next to me.

"Good. I like obedient boys. So, what did you want to talk about? I heard it had something to do with the request for the Lyk Skull Bear."

"Our request was for the liver of a Lyk Skull Bear and we heard you took the request for capturing one alive."

"Oh, so you're the ones that needed the liver. I can understand why you'd be in trouble if we capture it alive."

She was pretty straightforward. I thought it would be pointless to try to lie, so I said, "That's exactly right."

"Hmm? So, what are you going to do?"

"If possible, can you tell me the name of your client? It would be a big help...."

"That's impossible. Or at least, it's not something we can talk about without permission."

"Does the name Patrick Rodwell mean anything to you?"

"...never heard of him."

I suspected Patrick was the cause of this...but when I mentioned his name, Melissa didn't react. I'm not sure if I just can't read her face or if she's being honest.

For now, it's best if I assume she's telling the truth rather than accusing her of lying and ruining any chance we have of her helping us.

"Then, will you accept my request? I can offer a better reward if that's what you want."

"We could.... We never agreed to only help our current client, so there's nothing stopping us from accepting other requests."

"Then...?"

Melissa just shook her head.

"I'm sorry, but we have to refuse. We didn't take this request just for the reward."

"...you don't want a reward?"

"That's not quite right. We'd be lying if we said we didn't want any reward at all. We need money to live and we have a dream of someday buying back our family members."

Buy back their family members? I wanted to ask about this but I felt like it wasn't my place.

"Typically, we take whatever request pays the best...but this one is special."

"That's because there's another reason besides the reward for you to take this one."

"Exactly. The client is a benefactor who saved our fathers. And that's why we wish to fulfil this person's request."

"I see...."

This is another problem. I planned on solving this with money...but now that doesn't seem possible.

As I thought about this, they finished eating.

"Well, if that's everything –"

Melissa said this and stood up but Max remained seated.

"I'm guessing you'll have no chance of getting the liver if we don't take your request?"

"Yeah, it seems so according to what Sarah-chan said."

"I see. Does that mean you're giving up?"

"No. If we can't ask others to do it for us, we'll have to do it ourselves."

"...eh? You're saying you're going to hunt the Lyk Skull Bear?"

"Is that so strange?"

"...not really. I heard from Sarah that you're rank A which means you're stronger than us."

"And do you think I'm deserving of that rank?"

"Well, your body is slender but well-trained. I can tell you're stronger than you appear. If you say you want to go to the forest, I'm not going to stop you, but you should take a guide with you."

"...guide? Then –"

I think this elf named Alice that lived in the forest for most of her life should be a good enough guide.

"Even if you have an elf with you, I doubt she knows anything about the Garu Bear's habitat. Besides, just by looking at her, I can tell she never lived in these forests. It would be best if you took an actual guide with you."

...I see. The forest to the east is vast and the trees grow thick there. It would probably take us weeks of searching to find a Lyk Skull Bear.

"So, where can we find a guide?"

"Ask Sarah about that. We're not that generous."

"Oh, right. Sorry about that."

If we try to hunt the bear, we'll be competing with these two. Honestly, he was generous to help me at all.

"Thank you for everything. It was a big help."

"Don't mention it. Well then –"

Max stood up from the table and left with Melissa. We waved goodbye to them and went back to the reception desk.

"Welcome back, Leo-san. How did it go?"

"Unfortunately, they didn't agree. At this rate, we'll never get the liver, so we've decided to go out and hunt it on our own."

"– really!? After all, you are going to become legends in this town!"

"No, that's not why we're doing this."

Alice was murmuring "Finally, the royal road event is here." Please stop.

Sophia's so worried and she's thinking about that...or so I thought. Sophia was also mumbling, "The Legend of Leon Onii-chan...ehehe~"

Well, I don't plan on losing to Max and Melissa...but it's not like we're expert hunters. Aren't they both expecting too much?

"Then, I'll register each of you as an adventurer immediately."

"That's not necessary. I don't want to become a legend, we just need to hunt the Lyk Skull Bear. There's no need to register as an adventurer."

I tried to turn her down because we're in a hurry and I don't want to be bothered with going through the Guild. But Sarah repeated herself in a more serious tone.

"I know how capable you are Leo-san, but the forest to the east is massive. If you're hoping to find the Lyk Skull Bear, you'll need a guide."

"Oh, Max told me that as well.... I have to register with the Guild to get a guide?"

"Guides tend to not be the best fighters. Any decent guide won't travel with someone unless they know they're strong."

"Ah, it's like that."

We'd be travelling through forests inhabited by Garu bears. If our group is too weak, a single one could kill us all. If you can't prove your skill with an adventurer rank, you're not likely to find a good guide.

"All right, I'll register as an adventurer."

"I understand. I'll register you as a rank A adventurer under the name 'Leo.'"

"...I know you said so before, but is it okay for you to do that?"

"Your rank is usually defined by the results you achieve when taking on requests and I'm unable to set your rank on my own. However, you definitely meet the standards for A rank, Leo-san."

"...what are the standards?"

Sarah looked surprised that I didn't know. She motioned for me to lean in closer and started talking in a low whisper.

"You know it was the Grances family that decided the guild policies, right?"

"No, I know that, but...."

It was Alice and I that suggested a Guild be established. Claire took on a bigger role than us and set all of the rules. It is fair to say that we set the guild policies.

But when it comes to rank, it should only be decided by strength.

"There are certain standards we've set at each rank. The standard for rank A is that you must be of at least equal strength as Leon Grances."

"...seriously?"

"So, if you're stronger than Leon, you're rank A."

"...I see."

It was in the middle of the school year that we were ambushed in the forest and my true identity was revealed. There were even some classes that included battle training and I showed off my abilities there.

Several people may have witnessed my abilities...but I didn't think it would set the standards for an adventurer rank.

That would explain why I'm suddenly rank A.

"Actually, the rank is determined by a variety of factors, not just fighting power."

“It’s not just based on fighting power. By the way, what are their ranks?”

I pointed to Alice and Sophia.

“Umm...A rank or higher. Although, there isn’t anything above that.”

They surpass all ranks in the Guild. I expected it, but they really are better than me.

“Then, I’ll get all of this filed immediately. I’m sure you want to find a guide straight away. That will cost you more, is that okay?”

“Oh, of course, money isn’t a problem.”

“I understand. With such a good payout, it shouldn’t take longer than thirty minutes to find a guide.”

Sarah took the paperwork to the back and returned shortly with my Guild registration card.

— However, after waiting nearly an hour in a small room near the cafe, Sarah entered with an apologetic look on her face.

Chapter 18: Search for a Guide

“I’m sorry, Leo-san.”

Sarah, who previously seemed enthusiastic about finding us a guide, entered the room alone with a sullen expression on her face.

“You couldn’t find us a guide?”

“Actually...Daniel heard about it and told any guide interested that he doesn’t believe you deserve to be rank A.”

The moment she said his name I remembered the face of the man that caused us problems when we first came to the Guild.

“So, any guides that were interested are now declining.”

“I see....”

That guy is really getting on my nerves — although, I guess if I’m really not skilled enough to be rank A, our entire party would be killed in the forest.

It’s not like what Daniel is doing is bad. It’s just an annoyance.

I could say that I am actually Leon Grances or that Sophia and Alice were students at Muhle.

Or it may be easier to just prove my ability by challenging Daniel to a fight.

...that’s right. I haven’t shown off my ability to many people but I have no reason to hide it, and this may be the quickest solution.

The royal road event that Alice mentioned earlier popped back into my mind....

“Sarah-chan, where is Daniel?”

“Daniel-san left somewhere after spreading that rumour about you.”

“Hmm....”

Then, I could fight someone of equal rank that’s still here...I don’t know of anyone else that would work.

Both Max and Melissa have left.... In order to prove my strength, I might have to pick a fight with a stranger.

Ah, mou~, I wish I had just listened to Alice and done the royal road event when we first came here.

"Leo-san, I actually have an idea."

"An idea?"

"Yes. I actually know a girl that used to live in one of the villages in the forest near here. She's familiar with the forest and I can vouch for her abilities as a guide."

"And this girl hasn't heard about the rumours?"

"There's a chance she has heard of them, but she has debts and takes care of her younger brother. If you offer a large enough advance payment, she won't refuse."

"...are you saying she's prepared to die...?"

If my rank is false, she could die in the forest, but her brother could live comfortably off the advance payment.

"That girl has prepared herself to die."

Sarah then looked around and whispered, "But you can't let her die, Leon-sama."

"Don't worry. If it's Leon, a Lyk Skull Bear won't be a problem."

"She's right. Leon onii-chan is reliable."

The people that responded were Alice, a talented spirit mage, and Sophia, a girl skilled in close combat. Both of them would be stronger than me.

Well, if this thing is just a really strong bear, I think I should be able to manage.

"Then, please hire this girl, Leo-sama. She'll help you out and the money will be a big help to her and her brother. Sounds good for everyone, right?"

"I don't have a problem with that if you say this girl is knowledgeable enough to guide us, and if it will help her out, I can pay even more."

"No, the price right now should be more than enough. After all, I told you earlier that she had prepared herself to die — actually, I said I knew this girl, but we're actually friends that grew up in the same village. She's like a little sister to me. So, when I say you can count on her, you know you can trust me."

"...eh, little sister? Does that mean she's around ten years old...?"

Sophia and Claire were both strong when they were that young, so it's not like I doubt her abilities...but I'm not sure if she'd be physically capable of guiding us through the forest.

However, Sara-chan just laughed at my question.

"She's one year younger than me, one year older than you, Leo-san. She'll be seventeen this year."

"...what? Wait a minute. If she'll be seventeen, that means you're eighteen, Sarah-chan!?"

I can't believe that. Sarah leaned forward and held her finger over her lips. She then said, "It's a secret so I can continue working at the young girl cafes," and showed a mischievous smile.

...seriously. No matter how I look at her, she can't be older than twelve or thirteen.

Regardless of me actually being much older than I look, this girl is nearly twenty and looks like a young child. Sophia also looks young for her age, but... Sarah takes it to the extreme.

"I noticed that right away." [Sophia]

"Eh, really?"

"Yep, but I figured I'd let Sarah-chan tell you if she wanted."

I know Sarah was the one that recommended that restaurant to Sophia, but why would she want to protect her age.... When I think about it, Sophia is similar to Sarah in that she looks like a young girl.

Did she do it because they're alike...?

I thought maybe she told Alice about it, but when I looked at her she just

shook her head. Instead, she said,

“Leon, why do you think Sarah was assigned to work at the Guild instead of going to Muhle Academy?”

“...ah, I see.”

Even if she looks like a loli, she’s over eighteen and therefore doesn’t meet Crane’s criteria.

In other words, Crane is a genuine lolicon. He’s not interested in legal lolis.

I solved the mystery, but...I wish I hadn’t.

“So, where can I meet this girl?”

“You can find her –”

Sarah said a familiar name.

— We arrived in front of a familiar local restaurant we were at not long ago. The girl Sarah recommended to us as a guide was the waitress we had met earlier in the day. Remy.

We tried to enter but Daniel came out of the door before us.

“...so you came here after all. I came here just in case but it looks like it was the right decision.”

“You...I’m guessing you told Remy about me.”

“I don’t care if it causes problems for you. I would never be able to forgive myself if I let someone die when I could’ve stopped it.”

“I see....”

It’s clear that he dislikes me but he’s also genuinely worried about the guides. There was obvious sorrow etched on his chiselled face.

It’s possible this guy was a member of one of the villages Crane abandoned. If so, I can understand why he hates nobles just like Rick.

...well, that has nothing to do with me and now doesn’t seem like the time to

ask him. If we were at the guild, I could fight him to prove my strength...but it would be pointless here.

Thinking about this, I stopped talking to Daniel and tried to enter the restaurant. However, he held his hand out to stop me.

"Oi, are you still going to ask Remy? If you're planning on taking her forcibly, you may want to rethink that."

"Don't worry. I only plan on asking if she'll be our guide. Even if she declines, I have no intention of forcing her to do anything."

I gave Daniel an honest response.

"...hmm. That's good if you're telling the truth. If not, be prepared to suffer the consequences."

"Sure."

After hearing my reply, Daniel turned and walked down the road. I entered the restaurant, now even more motivated to get Remy to be our guide.

"– I won't let you take my sister!"

The moment I entered, Rick ran up to me and punched me.

...again?

Chapter 19: A Reward Worth the Risk

“Okay, okay, time to stop.”

I placed my hand on Rick’s head and held him there so he couldn’t reach me. When he heard my voice he stopped.

“...eh, that voice, you’re that guy from earlier!? What are you doing here?”

“Don’t worry about why I’m here. Why are you suddenly hitting people that come in?”

“I heard Daniel oji-san talking to someone outside. I thought it might be an adventurer coming to take Remy onee-chan.”

“Oh, that is me.”

“What!?”

“Aah, stop hitting me.”

First Sarah, then Daniel, and now Rick. There are too many people in this town that just won’t listen.

“– what are you doing, Rick!?”

“N-Nee-chan!?”

“Get over here!”

“I-It’s not what it looks like, nee-chan....”

“Get over here and get down in seiza!”

Remy repeated herself and Rick silently lowered his head.

After that, the manager came out from the back of the store. He appeared to be their older brother and dragged Rick off to the back.

We were guided to a seat in the corner of the restaurant and Remy was now the only one left with us.

“Leo-san, I’m very sorry.”

Remy deeply bowed her head. Because this is the second time in one day that

her brother has punched me, she seemed genuinely worried that I might do something.

"Please, raise your head. It will be hard to ask you this if you stay like that."

"Is that...about being a guide?"

"That's right. Will you accept?"

"I intended on refusing but...."

Remy looked towards the back of the store. I'm guessing she feels like she owes me now that her brother has hit me twice. I don't plan on punishing him in any way, but I remained silent because I need her help.

Then Remy spoke, "Would it be all right for me to hear the situation first and then decide?"

"Of course, I can wait to hear your reply. And even if you refuse, I won't get angry."

So, I spoke in a more relaxed manner and explained to her that we needed the liver of a Lyk Skull Bear, and to get it, we needed a guide for the forest.

"A Lyk Skull Bear...."

"Yes. It's a rare mutation of the Garu Bear. Have you heard of it?"

"I've never actually seen one.... I've heard that it's larger than a Garu Bear and quite ferocious. I don't mean to be rude, but...if you're just an adventurer, it may be difficult to hunt one."

"I think I should be fine. I haven't fought anything like it, but I'm confident in my abilities."

"If you get injured in the forest, other beasts may attack. If you're so injured you can't fight, you may even die out there."

"That may be the case, but we have no choice."

"I understand you have to do this to get the ingredient for the cure, but if you die out there, you'll have nothing."

"I know that. If it's clear that we can't do it, we can retreat, but I have to try. Will you be our guide? If you're willing to consider, I can make sure the pay is

high.”

“...the pay? How much is it...?”

“I’ll ask you that. How much will it take?”

When I asked her this, Remy seemed at a complete loss for words. Then, after a brief moment of silence, she asked for three gold coins as an advance payment.

Sarah mentioned Remy was in debt. Perhaps her debt is three gold coins.

“...is that okay?”

“It’s fine. We’ll pay you three gold coins as an advance and give you enough to buy any necessary equipment you’ll need. After, we’ll pay you an additional fee based on the results of the hunt.”

I answered with no hesitation and placed four gold coins on the table. I’m sure Remy wasn’t expecting me to agree so easily. Her eyes opened wide in shock.

“...I just said a ridiculous amount I never thought you’d pay. I’d be way overcharging you at that price. Is it really okay?”

“Due to our circumstances, I consider this a fair amount.”

Even though I’ve never done this, it’s quite obvious this is well above market price.

But Remy thinks we’re weak. So this price is based on her belief that none of us may return alive. Maybe this price is what Remy thinks her life is worth.

“I just want to make sure you know that I’m not able to fight. I can only be your guide. Is that okay?”

“Yep, that’s fine. We’ll take care of all the monsters.”

“...I see. All right. I’ll need to make some preparations and decide on a meeting point. We can meet up tomorrow morning, in front of the east gate....”

“– Please, wait a moment.”

I spoke up without thinking. I thought we didn’t have time to wait until tomorrow. Max and Melissa are already out in the forest.

But Remy could tell what I was thinking. She said, “We can’t go yet,” and shook her head.

“The forest is massive. We’ll be searching for a single Lyk Skull Bear in this huge forest. We have to be prepared to spend several weeks searching. It would be impossible for us to leave right now.”

“You’re right. I’m just being impatient.”

“No, I can understand your feelings. But, please believe me when I say, even with Melissa-san as my opponent, I’ll do whatever I can to ensure we don’t lose to her.”

“You know Melissa?”

“Umm...yes. Daniel is from the same town as me. It seems he’s been telling anyone who will listen about us. We’ve been getting a lot of adventurers coming in lately.”

“I see....”

Melissa is a regular here and Daniel is from the same town as Remy. That must be why Daniel came here before us.

“...umm, since I know Melissa-san, do you not trust me?”

“No, I trust you to be our guide. I’ll follow your instructions without question.”

Like this, we chose Remy as our guide —

“I’ll never allow it!”

After Remy told Rick about her decision, he became more upset than I had ever seen him.

Remy’s older brother, the shop manager, opposed her decision in the same way. He was trying to talk her out of it.

“Remy, please don’t do something so dangerous.”

“I know that it’s dangerous, but I’ll get three gold coins. We’ll never have a chance like this again. If we don’t take this opportunity, we’ll....”

“If it has to be done, I can be their guide.”

"That's.... You can't."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a better guide, Nii-san."

"That doesn't matter...."

He tried to argue with her but Remy calmly interrupted her older brother.

"Yes, it does. I'm the only one that can do this. Besides...who would look after the restaurant if you were away, Nii-san?"

"That's....but...."

The amount I'm paying her is equivalent to one year of a farmer's salary. It's obvious why she thinks it's worth risking her life for this.

"You all know Sarah, right?"

"Sarah onee-chan? Of course."

Remy's brothers nodded. But Sarah onee-chan...even Remy's older brother is younger than her. Well, I know her real age, but it's still strange.

"I have a message from her. She says, 'I can guarantee Leo-san's abilities. This is an extremely profitable request, so please accept it.'"

"...eh? B-But Daniel said he bought is way into A rank...."

"Daniel believes that, but I promise you I didn't. It was Sarah-san that decided I was A rank."

Remy seemed confused as to how Sarah could know anything about me. It was her older brother that spoke first.

"You know Sarah?"

"Yes. I sort of knew her before coming to this town."

"Before coming here...? You knew her when we still lived in Reiji village?"

"Liar~ I never saw you in Reiji village."

Rick quickly spoke after his brother.

"I met her after that."

I tried to be nonspecific and Rick and his older brother seemed confused, but Remy seemed to understand.

“Did you know each other at Muhle Academy?”

“Something like that. I’m actually the founder of that school.”

“Oh, I see...eh? The founder?”

“Well, to be exact, I’m Leon Grances, the head of the Grances Family.”

When I revealed who I am, they all fell silent. Then, Remy turned pale.

“U-Um, the head of the Grances Family? Doesn’t that mean you have the power of an earl!?”

“Eh? Yeah, that’s right.”

“Awawawawa~ Rick, a-a-apologize! Apologize right now or you’ll be beheaded!”

“No, no, no, I don’t plan on doing that. I’ve already said I don’t plan on punishing any of you.”

I was trying to calm Remy down.

But more important than that, Rick was now running at me again.

I didn’t panic as he rushed towards me. I simply held my hand out straight in front of me and prepared myself to stop him.

“UUUooooo~, Leon-sama! It’s a pleasure to meet you, my name is Rick!”

“O-Okay?”

Why is he suddenly introducing himself? And I thought he hated the nobility. Liar! I was expecting him to take a swing at me again, but this is surprising.

“Please, allow me to shake your hand!”

— Rick reached out and grabbed my hand. Before I could respond, Rick collapsed to the ground after Remy hit him on the head.

"I told you to stop being so rude! Just calm down.... Sorry, Leon-sama."

I think the girl hitting people is the one that needs to calm down.... Well, maybe now that Rick has calmed down, she will.

"You don't need to worry about it.... I didn't want my social status to cause trouble for me or anyone else, so I hid my identity.... But, umm, Rick...why are you excited?"

"Actually...well, when the Marquis of Gramp was able to help us, he told us it was thanks to the Earl of Grances."

...Did Crane tell his people that?

"So, you're saying you're grateful to me, Rick?"

"Yes! I hate the nobility but you're different, Leon-sama!"

Rick looked cute as his eyes were sparkling. Too bad he's a boy.

"And, of course, my older brother and I are grateful as well. Honestly, thank you very much, Leon-sama."

"I see.... Well, you're welcome."

Back then, I was desperate to protect myself and everyone I cared about. I didn't do it specifically to help other villagers. But it wouldn't do anyone any good if I said that.

...actually, wait a moment.

"Hey, Remy, you said that Melissa is familiar with the forest. Does that mean she's also from a village in the forest?"

"Yes, I've heard she is."

"Then, could it be that...Crane saved Melissa's village as well?"

"...no, I heard that her village was in worse shape than ours. Everyone that lived there abandoned it before Crane came to help."

"I see...."

Damn. If I were their benefactor, this could all be resolved quickly.

Remy then pushed the gold coins back at me.

“...what are you doing?”

“Leon-sama, you’re our benefactor. We can’t accept any rewards.”

“I’m sorry, but we’ve already agreed on a contract. It would look bad if I tried to go back on our agreement.”

“Then, at least change the amount. If Sarah onee-chan guarantees your abilities, I shouldn’t be in much danger. Just some silver coins –”

I stopped Remy by holding up my hand.

“I told you, we’ve already agreed on this contract. When we formed our contract, you believed there was a serious risk of dying in the forest. This amount is fair given the risk.”

“You....”

“It’s nice to meet you, guide.”

“...Leon-sama. Thank you.”

Remy bowed deeply.

“Even though he said he wouldn’t help.”

“Onii-chan is so cool.”

Alice and Sophia spoke up behind me, but all I did was agree to pay the reward.

I’m actually surprised they didn’t say anything until now.

Anyway, Remy seemed convinced, so I turned my focus to Rick and his older brother.

“Is it okay if I borrow Remy as our guide?”

“I know she’ll be fine if she’s with you, Leon-sama!”

Rick answered immediately. I thanked him then looked at his older brother.

He was silently looking at Remy. Then, after giving Remy a slight nod, he turned back to me.

“...without you, we wouldn’t even be here. If you need my sister’s help, please, take her with you.”

"Thank you. I promise, on the name of Grances, that I will return her home safely. And with that, Remy, we'll be in your care."

"Of course! Please, leave it to me, Leon-sama! I'll definitely find the Lyk Skull Bear!"

Remy gave a big nod. Her cheeks were slightly red as she said this.

"...hey, Leon? If you're going to make Remy one of your sisters, don't you think you should ask for the Marquis of Gramp's permission?"

Alice whispered this to me.

— eh, what is she talking about? We just need a guide.

Sophia also whispered, "If it means she can repay you, Remy is willing to do anything," to me.

So, we agreed to have Remy act as our guide. There's a strong possibility we'll have to spend several weeks in the forest, so we'll need to spend all day tomorrow making preparations.

We decided to return to the mansion today.... At this time, I had no idea that a letter from Claire containing grave news had arrived at the mansion.

Chapter 20: Letter from Claire

Starting tomorrow, we'll be spending a few weeks out in the forest. We have a lot of preparations to make, but Crane's servants are taking care of that.

So, I was relaxing in the Marquis of Gramps' drawing room. I was enjoying tea time for the first time in a while.

"It's been a while since it was just the two of us."

Milli sat opposite me.

I'm usually with Claire and Alice. Sophia has been spending time with Milli, but Milli is usually working as a servant when we're not with her.

It's been a long time since we were alone together. It reminded me of the time we spent alone together outside the Grances mansion.

No, I'm not missing being locked up. I'm not into that.

"That's because you're always surrounded by pretty girls, Leon."

"I can't deny that.... Are you saying that's a bad thing?"

"Of course not. I'm just wondering when I'll get to see my grandchild."

"...a grandchild. I'm still only sixteen years old."

"That's old enough to be having children."

...of course. You can get married at age twelve in this world. It wouldn't be surprising for a sixteen year old to have children. In fact, Milli gave birth to me when she was sixteen.

"Well...I don't have time to think about stuff like that now. Maybe once things have calmed down I will."

After I agreed to go out with Alice, I did the same with Sophia. I'm still unsure where Claire and I stand and now we're trying to cure Elyse. I don't have time to be thinking about grandchildren.

"Fufu~, I look forward to it."

Milli giggled as my face turned red. Elsa then entered the room carrying a letter.

“What is it?”

“A letter has arrived from Claire-sama.”

I received the letter from her and turned it over to see the wax seal. There’s no doubt this is from Claire. The emblem of the Grances family was engraved in the wax.

I thanked Elsa and began to open the letter, but Elsa didn’t leave.

“Was there something else?”

“Please, take me as an escort when you go into the forest tomorrow.”

“That again? I told you to stay in the mansion.”

“I know that you’re strong enough, Leon-sama. But I exist to protect you.”

She looked desperate. Almost as if being left at the mansion would make her life meaningless.

“Umm, Elsa, I never said I don’t need you. I need you to stay at the mansion.”

“What do you mean?”

“I need Alice with me to hunt the Lyk Skull Bear because she has heightened senses. Sophia is worried about Elyse, so she needs to come as well.”

With them at my side, I don’t expect us to have any problems in the forest. But with all of us gone, there will be only one person I can completely trust here.

“Please, protect Milli in my absence.”

“That’s umm...could it be that?”

Elsa looked surprised. I thought about it for a moment, then realized she misunderstood my words.

I’m guessing she believes that I don’t trust Crane. I shook my head and immediately attempted to clear up the misunderstanding.

“She’s safe within the mansion. This city is improving, but it’s nowhere near as

safe as Muhle. There's a chance she'll be targeted because she's from a noble family. That's why I want you to stay with her."

And I now know that many citizens hold a grudge against Crane.

"That's what you meant. Then, certainly, by my honour as a knight, I'll protect Milli-sama."

"I'm counting on you."

Elsa seemed happier as she left the room.

Milli told me she was happy that I was worried about her, but she didn't think it was necessary.

Anyway — I opened Claire's letter and was left breathless after reading it.

"...Leon, what's wrong?"

"I need to go find Alice."

"Oh, you're ready to try making me a grandchild?"

"Why would you think that? I need to talk with her about this letter!"

I arrived in front of Alice's door and gave a quick knock.

"— Leon? You can come in."

"...you could already tell it was me."

I was surprised when I entered her room. Sophia and Alice were already sitting at a table discussing something.

"You always knock in the same way and there a very few people in this mansion that knock three times."

"Ah, I see."

In Japan, there was no set standard for the number of times you knock on a door. But in this world, there is a set amount that's considered proper.

You knock three times when it's someone you're close with. Only Milli, Sophia, Alice, and I would be considered close enough to each other to knock three times in this mansion.

"So, what did you need?"

"Ah, well, I needed to talk with Alice...."

I sat at their table and glanced over at Sophia.

"Hmm? Is it about something you only do at night? Then, can I join in this time?"

"– That's not what this is about!"

...wait, did she just say she wanted to join in? No, I'm sure I just misheard her. It was just in my mind....

"Hey, Leon? I'm sure Sophia already knows enough to join in with us, but I think her first time should be with you alone."

"Didn't you hear what I said...!? Wait, I haven't even told you that I agreed to date Sophia yet."

"Ah, yeah, Sophia already told me. Congratulations, Leon."

"Thank you.... It's kind of weird that you're congratulating me for that."

"Oh, would you rather I act jealous."

"That's not exactly what I meant...."

I'm planning on being with several girls and they're all determined to be friends with each other. But it would still be nice if they were a little jealous.

...it would help my guilt if at least one of them got angry or jealous

"It's fine, Leon. I like you and I also like Sophia and Claire. The four of us can live happily together."

"Thank you...but you're already including Claire."

"You're not planning on leaving her out, are you?"

"Leaving her out'...."

To go out with her when I'm already going out with two girls.... I feel like it's unfair to her. However, it's been several years since she confessed to me. It's about time I gave her a proper answer.

"Once this is settled, I'll speak with Claire. I know Alice is okay with it, but... what about you, Sophia?"

"Yep. I'd be happiest if everyone is together."

"I see.... Thank you."

However, I still felt a little sad that she wasn't jealous. It's possible she's using her ability right now. Alice giggled.

"A man's heart is a complicated thing."

"...leave me alone."

"Fufu~, all right. So, what did you actually need?"

"Actually, I needed your advice...."

Claire's letter was about Elyse's condition. Her health was rapidly declining and she was only expected to have a few months left.

I'm not sure if I want Sophia knowing about this. I came here to only speak with Alice, but my timing was bad.

"Leon? Is something wrong?"

"That's...."

When Alice asked this, I inadvertently looked over at Sophia. Sophia noticed and tilted her head to the side.

"...Leon onii-chan?"

"...."

All I could think about was that I shouldn't let Sophia know about this, but that feeling will be directly transmitted to her.

"...Leon onii-chan? Are you worried about something and trying to hide it from me?"

"– Stop!"

I raised my voice instantly. This is just like that day — I was trying to hide what her parents had done and she used her ability to read my feelings.

I didn't want this to turn out the same way, but Sophia didn't look upset. A gentle expression appeared on her face as she stared back at me.

"Leon onii-chan, if you're trying to hide something from me, I won't use my ability."

"Sophia...."

It's a different result from that day. I'm happy to see that Sophia is growing, but I wasn't looking forward to her next words.

And she said exactly what I expected.

"But, please, if it involved me, tell me. I can handle it."

If she used her ability, she could find out exactly what I'm hiding. Yet, she didn't, and instead, asked me directly.

I'm worried about how she'll react....

"Fine, I'll tell you. But please, stay calm and listen to everything."

"Thank you, Leon onii-chan."

Her red eyes sparkled and a gentle smile appeared on her face. Sophia is really growing up...but I can't even be happy knowing what I have to tell her.

I let out a small sigh and said, "Elyse's condition has deteriorated."

"...eh, Mother? That can't be."

"I'm sorry, but...it's true. Claire told me in her letter."

"Then...is my mom going to die?"

"No, she seems to have stabilized but she must remain in bed. She still has a few months left."

"Well...we can still make it in time if we find the liver?"

"Yes, we should have time. I can't guarantee we will, but...Claire is also doing whatever she can to help."

I would love to say that she'll definitely be fine.

But I feel uneasy and I know Sophia would be able to tell I'm lying.

"...Leon onii-chan, thank you for telling me."

"You don't need to thank me.... But are you okay?"

"I'm worried about my mother, but I still have you two with me. So, I'll be okay.... You will stay with me, won't you?"

There's no way I can say no to her when she makes such a cute face.

No, I would never say no to her anyway. I told her, "Of course."

"Thank you, Leon onii-chan. Then, we'll sleep together tonight."

"...what?"

"You already agreed to it!"

"Wait, wait, what do you mean 'sleep together?'"

"I mean we'll all sleep together in this room."

"No, no, no, that's a bit much."

"Don't worry. We're just going to sleep, just sleep!"

...no, there's no chance it's that simple. This is the type of flag that leads to no sleep at all.

"Anyway, this is Crane's mansion, we shouldn't sleep together here. You should just stay with Alice tonight, Sophia."

I don't know how serious Sophia was about that, but I expect she really does want someone to stay with her tonight.

But this is also why I can't sleep with her. We wouldn't sleep and it wouldn't even help Sophia's anxiety.... I absolutely can't sleep with Sophia in Crane's mansion.

...I really feel that Crane has cursed me.

"Why won't you? You won't grant my request?"

"I'd do almost anything for you but I can't do that."

"I'm not asking you to do anything; I'm asking you to do ecchi things."

"That's not any better!"

Chapter 21: To the Forest

— The next morning, we joined Remy at our meeting place in town.

“I think we’re all ready to enter the forest.”

“...no, umm, are you sure about that?”

“What do you mean?”

Remy was looking over us, seemingly unsure if we had prepared correctly. I looked down at my clothes. I was wearing a pair of long pants and a shirt. Both of these were engraved with Alice’s inscription magic. They were typical casual clothing.

“...is there anything wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“No, you’re dressed fine, Leon-sama. But those two are clearly dressed inappropriately....”

I turned to look at the two she was talking about.

Alice is wearing an off-shoulder top and a tiered mini skirt. The absolute territory between her knee socks and skirt are amazing. This really is my favourite outfit.

Sophia was wearing a white and black gothic dress. Her skirt is long but opens up just above her knees. Her thigh highs would occasionally be revealed when her skirt shifted. This outfit is also really cute.

“I don’t see anything wrong. They’re just cute.”

“No, no, no, they certainly are cute, but isn’t that the problem!? Are they planning on entering the forest dressed like that? The insects will eat them alive and that clothing will do little to protect them!”

“Ah, that’s what you mean. Don’t worry, our clothes are specially made.”

Obviously, this is due to Alice’s inscription magic. For these, she removed the usual lasers and in its place, these clothes have stronger defensive properties.

By the way, I never really thought about it, but it seems there can only be a

limited number of inscriptions that one person can have active at any given item.

Inscription magic constantly pulls out the mana that a person unconsciously creates by absorbing the magical power in the air. So, it entirely depends on how much mana the inscriptions require, but in general, a single person can have three active at once.

If a person were to have too many active at once, this would lead to a mana deficiency, which would temporarily leave them in a weakened state similar to Elyse.

Alice and I have the ability to consciously produce mana, so we may be able to maintain more inscriptions at once.

Anyway, I explained to Remy that they were fine as their clothing was engraved with inscription magic.

"If you say it's fine, I won't say anything else...but if it gets too hard, we can turn back for today, okay?"

"Oh, that's fine. Then, we should get going."

"All right, I'll have to cut my way through some areas of the forest, please, stay right behind me. If it's getting hard to keep up, tell me and I can slow down."

Near the edge of the forest, Remy made her way through a row of thick bushes. Following her words, I followed right behind her.

However...Sophia was right next to me, cutting her way through the bushes using her dagger. Does she want to walk by my side that badly?

A young girl wearing a gothic dress cutting her way through a forest with a dagger...it's quite a surreal scene.

While thinking about this, I turned to look to my other side and saw Alice walking next to me. Although...wasn't doing anything as she casually walked through the bushes.

I was wondering how she could be walking so casually when I noticed the bushes in front of her seemed to be moving away from her.

...is she using spirit magic? Unfair. I'm going to do that too.

But how.... Could I use the wind to push back the branches? No, the ivy wrapped around the branches would still be in my way. I could use wind to push back most of the branches and cut down any of the ivies that remain....

Ah, it's working!

— We continued on our way through the bushes before Remy suddenly stopped in front of us. She looked astonished when she turned toward us.

“...all of you are so strange. Everything you do seems to be completely out of the ordinary.”

“Yeah, I can understand your feelings. Alice and Sophia are extraordinary.”

“...umm, that’s not.... I guess so.”

She looked at me before looking away. Is she trying to say I’m as strange as them?

Well, I am getting better with spirit magic, but...when I compare myself to these two, I find it hard to feel that special.

I wonder if Remy was able to tell how I felt.... She let out a sigh and turned around before walking forward once more.

“In any case, it’s good that we’ll be able to move forward faster than I expected. We won’t be far behind Melissa and she left a full day earlier than us.”

“Faster than you thought...? Aren’t we progressing rather slowly?”

“Normally, it would be a lot more difficult moving forward, right? Usually, the bushes don’t move out of your way.”

“I’m glad we’re making good time, but I was expecting us to be able to cover more ground.... Is there any chance we can move a little faster?”

“No, I’m worried about everyone’s physical fitness and if we start rushing through the forest, there’s a good chance we could run into a Garu Bear. If possible, I want to avoid surprising a Garu Bear and having to fight it.”

“Ah...I see.”

A Garu Bear is similar to an ordinary bear but it has absorbed the magical power in the air. It behaves like any ordinary bear. That is to say, if you surprise one, it will likely attack you.

If we wanted to avoid Garu Bears, we could just talk loudly or sing while walking through the forest, but that would also scare off any Lyk Skull Bears.

I thought Remy was just being overly cautious, but this was the actual reason we were moving so slowly.

"That's right.... The forest is vast and there are many creatures within it. Even if I can detect the creatures around us, it's only once every few seconds with a radius of thirty metres."

"Hmm, then could we tell if there's a Garu Bear near us?"

"Umm...I can tell if the creature is large but I can't tell the difference between a Garu Bear and a Lyk Skull Bear. No matter what, we'll need to see the creature to know for sure."

"Well, this would at least allow us to increase our pace, right?"

"Remy-chan, would it be okay if we sped up a bit?"

"Umm...what do you mean?"

Remy curiously tilted her head at Alice's question.

"Alice has the ability of heightened senses."

"— Ability!? Aren't those considered to be gifts from God!? Amazing, this is the first time I've ever met someone with one!"

Alice showed a bitter smile in response to Remy's respectful gaze. Sophia also has an ability but Alice has two.

"I'll be able to tell you if a Garu Bear is within thirty metres."

"Thirty metres.... Amazing. Can you use it while walking too?"

"I feel some fatigue, but it should be fine if it's only thirty metres."

"By the way, is there a Garu Bear near us now?"

"Not right now. There was one a while ago that you avoided."

"Wow.... Amazing, you really can tell."

"Fufu~, were you doubting me?"

"Eh? No, umm...I'm sorry."

Alice giggled when Remy became apologetic.

"Sorry about that, I was joking.... You're a guide, Remy-chan, you can't rely on an ability you've never heard about, but as you can see, my ability is real so we can increase our pace."

"All right then. Let's not waste any more time."

Like this, we increased our pace and headed for the heart of the forest.

We continued walking for a few hours.

When the sun was just above the horizon, Remy stopped us in a small clearing.

"The sun will be setting soon. We should set up camp here and get dinner ready. We'll also need to gather firewood."

"All right, I'll get the sleeping area ready."

Alice was the first to offer to help. Remy looked surprised that Alice was so willing to help.

"I'm glad you want to help...but can you do it yourself?"

"Yep, don't worry about me."

"Okay then. Alice can take care of the tent, after that...."

"I'll get dinner ready!"

"Umm...."

Sophia's a young girl dressed in a gothic dress. She probably doesn't seem the type to be able to cook. Remy once again looked confused.

But there's no need to worry about her. Sophia is a great cook.

"Is that so. Then...I can go gather firewood."

"I can come with you."

"Eh, that's fine...but are you sure?"

"Don't worry. As a man, I should be the one gathering firewood. Besides, it would be dangerous if you were to encounter a Garu Bear on your own."

"Well, then...umm, please do."

Remy and I left the camp to find firewood.

"...what kind of person makes an earl gather firewood?"

While we were picking up firewood, Remy muttered this to herself.

"I'm the one that asked you to be our guide. I really don't mind."

"Okay. Umm...I was expecting to have to do everything myself, so I was surprised when everyone volunteered."

"After all, we're all a bit strange."

If we were ordinary nobles, there's no way we'd offer to help.... Well, ordinary nobles would never come into the forest in the first place.

"But, is it really okay to have them make dinner and set up the tent on their own?"

"It should be fine. Sophia's a great cook and Alice is...."

Does she know how to set up a tent? Well, before we met, she said she was travelling. There's a strong chance she would've needed a tent at some point.

Wait...Alice never mentioned a tent. She said something about preparing the 'sleeping area.'

I'm worried about that subtle difference. Is it all just in my head...?

"Leon-sama, what's wrong?"

"I suddenly have a bad feeling. No, it's not a bad feeling, but a feeling that someone isn't going to show any self-restraint."

"Umm...?"

"Sorry, don't worry about it. I've got all the firewood I can carry, should we head back?"

We returned to the small clearing.

In the previously empty clearing, I saw a small hut surrounded by an earthen wall around the height of a person.

Chapter 22: Assailant....

I returned to the campsite with Remy. Although it was just a simple clearing minutes ago, it was now surrounded by earth walls and had a hut built in the centre.

The area within the walls was around ten metres squared and the wooden hut in the middle could fit four people comfortably.

Is this Alice's doing? As usual, she shows no self-restraint. As soon as we got near the wall, it sunk into the ground and allowed us to enter. And right behind the wall, Alice stood, smiling.

"Welcome home, Leon. You're back early."

"I'm home.... Rather, what is all this?"

"Isn't it obvious. This is our house where we sleep."

"...did you build it?"

"I just used a little bit of spirit magic."

"A little bit...."

"Just a little."

"I see...."

Well, she is Alice — even so, I'm impressed by how fast she works.

The hut consisted of four pillars with thin boards making up the walls and boards set up diagonally across the pillars to make the roof.

It's a pretty basic hut, but it's something that shouldn't be possible to make in just fifteen minutes.

When I looked inside the hut, there was even a hole dug to be used as a toilet.

"Don't you think you're overdoing it? Look, Remy's still stunned."

Remy was still standing outside the gate. She hadn't moved since the wall opened up. I feel that that's a reasonable response given she came back to see an empty clearing had transformed into a small plaza in a matter of minutes.

"Eh, I thought I was showing self-restraint? Did I do too much?"

"It definitely exceeds any normal person's expectations of a campsite...."

"I'm really bad at restraining myself. But if you say so, Leon, I'll stop here. My legs are tired after walking for so long, so I was thinking about making a footbath, but I guess that would be bad."

She said this and turned away from me. I quickly grabbed onto her arm.

"...Leon?"

"We really shouldn't follow other people's standards. We should just do what feels right."

"...in other words?"

"Please, make a footbath."

I can't possibly say no to a footbath.

"Then, I can make a tub, but...there's something I'd like to try."

"What do you mean?"

I was wondering what else she was planning to do.

"I'll form a bathtub out of clay using spirit magic. I want you, Leon, to heat the clay so it hardens."

"Hmm? Ah...this could work as an alternative to an oven. Couldn't we just make a furnace?"

"Like I said, this is an experiment."

"An experiment...that sounds fine I guess, but won't the magics interfere with each other?"

Magic doesn't follow the normal laws of physics, but that's not to say it doesn't follow any rules.

For example, it's incredibly difficult for magic to directly affect a living organism. This is due to the passive mana that lies within living creatures causing an interference.

And the mana within a living creature isn't the only thing that can interfere

with magic.

For example, if fire and water magic were cast at the same spot, either the fire would be put out or the water would evaporate.

"It would be impossible if we did it separately. However — like this, we should be fine."

The moment Alice said this, her senses merged with my own. The amount of information I was taking in suddenly swelled and I grimaced.

"Oi, oi, don't suddenly turn on sensory sharing."

Another one of Alice's abilities is for her to share her senses with her partner.

"I'm only sending you the information you'll need; you should be able to handle it. I'm going to start using spirit magic. Please, avoid interfering with it."

"Don't make such an unreasonable request so casually."

In theory, it may be possible.

But she's asking me to look through her eyes and do precision work. I don't think that's something any normal person could do so suddenly.

"Leon, please...hurry...."

"Ah, mou~, I get it!"

I focused on Alice's sense and activated my spirit magic. The spirit of heat I was controlling interfered with the spirit Alice controlled and the clay bathtub shattered.

"....Leon."

"....what? If you have something to say, say it."

"Fine.... You're clumsy, Leon."

"You're just too skillful! Let's just do it again!"

After making the same mistake about ten times, I finally managed to complete the clay bath. It took a while and it doesn't look the best, but it's good enough.

However, if we can improve our technique, it may be possible for us to make

steel. I'll have to practice with Alice some more.

Anyway, since the footbath was now complete, Alice's experiment is now over. I decided to make some simple cookware for Sophia to use.

"Remy, I'll be making a furnace here so can you put the firewood nearby?"

"...eh? Ah, s-sure. I'll do it right away!"

Remy, who was still frozen at the gate, finally returned to her senses and put her firewood by me.

"Actually, who exactly are you people? There wasn't anything here just a few minutes ago. Is it possible to do stuff like this with magic?"

"This isn't just magic.... This is what I call the 'Alice Cheat.' It's best if we just leave it at that. It'll just be bothersome if you try to think about it too much."

"Haa~...I don't think I understand, but I can see that you're all capable of amazing things. I know why Sarah onee-chan made you rank A."

With Remy watching on in amazement, I created a simple furnace using spirit magic. Remy looked surprised for a moment but then just let out a deep sigh.

"I'm home~"

When I finished creating the furnace, Sophia returned. Now that I think about it, she wasn't here when we got back. I wonder where she went.

"Welcome back. Where did you go?"

"I went out to get dinner."

I turned around to see Sophia walking through the gate with a bird in her hands.

"S-Sophia? What are you doing with that bird?"

"I just caught it. Onii-chan, can you dig a hole for me?"

"I can, but what are you going to do...?"

With an unpleasant feeling forming in my gut, I dug out a small hole for her. Sophia stood next to the hole before putting her hand beneath her skirt, pulling out her dagger, and swiftly cut off the bird's head.

She held the bird over the whole and allowed the blood to pour into it.

"S-S-S-So-Sophia, wh-what are you doing!?"

"What do you mean...? I'm draining its blood. If I don't do this, the meat will be bloody."

"N-No, I know that, but...isn't that cruel?"

Eh, what are you saying, onii-chan? You eat meat all the time."

"That's, well...umm...."

If I think about it calmly, what Sophia said isn't wrong. The meat we eat every day comes from animals that have been killed in a similar manner.

I can't call it cruel if I eat meat.

Still....

Wearing a gothic dress with a dagger in hand and a bleeding headless bird in the other.... It's so surreal.

Sophia is smiling while watching the blood drain from the bird. Is she just happy about the dinner we'll be eating...?

"Hey, Leon onii-chan?"

"Yesh!?"

I couldn't help but yell out in surprise.

"What sounds better: steamed or grilled?"

"Ah...umm, grilled."

"All right. I'll get everything ready."

Sophia put some water in a pan over the furnace and quickly got a fire going. She began warming the bird she had drained of its blood.... At no point did she seem unsure of what to do.

Well, she has been studying cooking at the academy. It's no wonder she's so capable.

I guess she was just doing what was necessary. I should make myself useful as well.

"Sophia, is there anything I can do to help?"

"Umm, after I'm done steaming this, can you remove its feathers?"

"...Uku, i-is there a smaller hurdle I could attempt first?"

"After the feathers have been plucked...we need to cut it open and remove its organs."

"Please, allow me to remove its feathers!"

The cooking was soon completed, but my spirit was exhausted. When I thought about the fact that we'll have to do this every day...I realized how serious survival is.

Well, it was delicious. Grilled skewers made from fatty bird meat.

We searched through the forest over the next few days with little luck. However, on this day, Alice grabbed Remy's arm and told her to stop.

"There are two Garu Bears up ahead. One of them seems like a child."

"– Eh? Where?"

Remy's expression hardened when she heard this. We have encountered several Garu Bears over the last few days, but this is the first one with a child.

Bears are said to be ferocious when they're protecting their babies.

"One of them...is on the other side of that tree."

Alice pointed to a tree straight ahead of us. I looked in that direction but couldn't see any sign of a bear. However, Remy held her breath.

"This is bad. We should head back and move around them."

Remy tried to turn around, but Alice grabbed her arm again.

"Don't worry about it. I can get them to move away."

"I don't doubt it, but we should avoid doing anything that would lead to a fight."

"That's true...but even so...."

Alice was being evasive. She only gets like this when she has a good reason. I asked her, “Is there a reason we shouldn’t go back?”

“I was staying silent so you wouldn’t get worried, but three people have been following us for the past few days.”

Eeeeehhh!? W-W-What should we do? Do you think they’re bandits!?”

Remy yelled out in surprise.

Her voice was loud, so I was afraid anyone following us may have heard her, but when I turned around I couldn’t see any signs of movement.

“I think they’re a good distance back. At first, I thought it was a coincidence, but they’ll occasionally come within thirty metres. They seem to be following the path we make through the forest.”

“I see....”

We’re steadily making our way through the forest and our path is easy to follow.

However...if that’s the case, it’s no coincidence.

Are they just ordinary bandits...? I couldn’t help but remember what Crane told me earlier. There’s a chance Patrick is after me himself or he’s hired someone....

If so, they’ll be looking for any opportunity to kill us. And if we’re constantly worried about them, we may accidentally walk into a Garu Bear.

Just as I thought this, a bestial roar rang out from in front of us.

“The Garu Bear has detected us and the people behind us seem to be running towards us.”

What terrible timing. No...the people behind us are probably attacking now that the Garu Bear has noticed us.

“All right.... Alice, can you repel the Garu Bear without killing it?”

“Yep. Leave it to me.”

“Then, Alice will handle the bear while I focus on the people behind us.”

"Roger."

Alice ran out toward the bear as I turned to Sophia.

"Sophia, can you protect Remy?"

"Yeah, leave it to me. Leon onii-chan, be careful."

"Thanks, I will."

I smiled to reassure Sophia then turned to Remy.

"Stay quiet and listen to whatever Sophia says."

"No, umm...what are you all doing? We're caught between a Garu Bear and bandits. We need to leave immediately!"

Sophia grabbed Remy's arm as she started to panic.

"Don't worry. Alice onee-chan will drive off the bear and Leon onii-chan can handle those three."

"But...."

Sophia gently reassured Remy.

When I confirmed they were in a safe place, I hid as best I could behind a tree. I then waited for the perfect time to launch a surprise against the people following us.

A few tense moments passed before I could hear the sound of someone running through the bushes. Just before he reached the tree I was hiding behind, I jumped out and landed a punch square on his jaw.

...that's one down.

"You.... What are you doing!?"

Another man noticed me and yelled before running towards me. But these people were planning on attacking us while we fought with the Garu Bear.

In other words, I have nothing to say to them.

“O-Oi!? Stay back — damn it!”

The man panicked before taking up a fighting stance — he’s slow. I stepped forward and easily dodged his attack before sweeping his legs out from under him and kicking him under the jaw. Two down.

The last one left turned to run — but he was soon sent flying through the air. It looks like Sophia took care of him.

“Are you both okay?”

“Remy and I are fine. Alice onee-chan is....”

Sophia said this and looked in the direction of the Garu Bear just as Alice was returning.

“I’m fine too. I drove off the Garu Bear without injuring it.”

“As expected of you.”

I can’t imagine it’s easy to drive off a monster like a Garu Bear without injuring it.

“— Eeeeh!?”

Remy let out another unexpected scream. When I looked over at her she was staring down at the body of the man Sophia had thrown.

What’s wrong...eh? Isn’t that old man Daniel?”

...what’s he doing here? I was sure it was someone hired by Patrick, but Daniel isn’t working for him, is he?

Or is this entirely unrelated to Patrick? Is he still jealous I was made a rank A adventurer?

...well, I guess we’ll find out once we interrogate them. We tied all of them up together.

Chapter 23: There Is No Right Answer

“ — Oi, what’s going on!?”

Shortly after Daniel woke up, he realized he was tied up.

“We should be asking you that. Why were you following us?”

“Wha -!? You noticed us!?”

“So you admit you were following us.”

“...no, that’s....”

Daniel couldn’t look me in the eye. That’s as good as admitting his guilt.

Remy looked shocked after witnessing this. I know they’re from the same town.

There’s no point in prolonging this. I just need to ask them directly.

“Why are you here? Were you planning on killing us?”

“W-What are you saying!? I’d never do that!”

“Then why were you trying to attack us when the Garu Bear noticed us?”

“That was just a misunderstanding.”

They all looked as if they were genuinely unsure as to why we attacked them.

“If this really was a misunderstanding, what are you doing here?”

“We were just...trying to save you when the Garu Bear attacked.”

“...ha? Save us? You mean protect Remy?”

“Not just Remy but all of you as well.”

I wasn’t expecting him to say that. I really can’t believe it, so I turned to Sophia who nodded to tell me he wasn’t lying.

So...this guy is just really a good person.

“Hey, Daniel, why did you get involved with me in the first place?”

“I already told you. I won’t allow anyone to buy their way to the top, but

nobody ever listens.”

“And why did you say something like that to Sarah?”

“...something like what?”

“You were going to force Sarah to stay with you overnight.”

At first, I wanted to take Daniel on his word, but since he said something like that, I thought he was a bad person.

“If you were to cause problems, Sarah-chan would be held responsible. So, I wanted to keep her away from you.”

“Then why say anything about staying overnight? Why not just say that from the start?”

“That’s because I....”

Daniel mumbled something I couldn’t make out.

Remy, who had now recovered from her shock, said, “Daniel-san can be awkward, but he really cares about Sarah-chan. After all, they’re childhood friends.”

“Childhood friends...? How old is Daniel?”

Even if Sarah is much older than she looks, there’s no chance Daniel is young enough to be her childhood friend, but Remy told me he’s actually twenty-one. Seriously? I thought he was at least in his thirties.

However...twenty-one and eighteen aren’t that far apart.

This guy really is just a good person.

...eh? But Sophia is the one that took Daniel down. She should’ve been able to tell that Daniel didn’t plan on hurting us.

“Hey, Sophia?”

“No, that’s not why I did it.”

...I didn’t even say anything yet.

“You know....”

“Umm, onii-chan, anyone that mocks you is my enemy. I’ll never let an enemy

get near you."

"R-Right...."

She could tell he didn't mean me any harm but still thought of him as an enemy. It's nice that she wants to protect me, but I'd rather she try to find a more peaceful resolution.

"Hey, nii-chan, if this misunderstanding has been resolved, can you untie us?"

"Ah, right...."

I untied them and apologized to Daniel for thinking he was a bad guy.

...well, if Daniel didn't mislead me so much, I never would've thought that. Still, I did feel bad about Sophia throwing him.

"So, what are you going to do now? Are you still planning on following us?"

I asked Daniel this as he was removing all of the rope on him.

Even if he wasn't planning to harm us, I don't like the idea of someone following us, so I'd rather they go back.

"Don't worry. We've already caused you enough trouble. We'll go back to town — I know I have no right to do this, but I have a request."

"...what is it?"

"Sarah treats Remy like a sister. So Remy is kind of like a little sister to me."

...I wasn't sure why he was telling me this at first.... But I can tell he doesn't want to see Remy put in danger.

"Are you trying to say you don't want us to take Remy with us?"

"Yes, but I know neither you nor Remy will listen. So I want you to prove your strength to me."

"...my strength?"

"Yeah. That surprise attack earlier was impressive, but it won't be enough to handle a Lyk Skull Bear. Prove to me that you have enough strength to protect everyone."

"I'm fine with that but...didn't you see our camp?"

Alice said they were following us for a few days. We've been building the same campsite every night so I would assume he has.

Or is something like that normal for adventurers.

"Right, that hut certainly was surprising. However, magic takes time to cast and you won't find it as useful with a Lyk Skull Bear right in front of you."

...I see. I remember Patrick's black magic taking forever to cast.

I always compare my own ability to Alice and it makes me feel like I can't even compare.... However, it seems that other magic users in this world are comparable to Patrick. I'm a little relieved.

"In other words, you want me to prove that I can fight?"

"That's right. One-on-one, just you and me. We'll use swords wrapped in cloth. The first one to land a blow is the victor. I hope that sword hanging from your waist isn't just for show; take it out."

...oh, so he thinks I'm a swordsman. I was just planning on showing him I could use magic and no chant.

Well, this could still work out. I've practiced fighting using a blade with Elsa and Sophia. It could be good to see how I compare to a rank B adventurer.

If I really deserve to be rank A, I should have no problem defeating a rank B adventurer like Daniel.

Sara does know about my skill with spirit magic.

If it's just going to be a fight using swords, Daniel most likely will be stronger than me. Sophia was able to take him down easily, but I don't think she counts as a normal person. I may lose if I get careless.

So, I'll have to defeat Daniel without using spirit magic. I called Alice over to make some preparations.

And shortly after —

"Sorry for the wait. I'm ready when you are."

I had my normal longsword in my right hand and Alice's rapier in my left. Both

of them were wrapped in cloth.

"Two swords...is this a joke to you?"

"Hmm, who knows."

Two swords aren't guaranteed to be stronger.

You have to be both strong and dexterous to wield two swords effectively in combat. There's little chance anyone could dual wield for the first time and win a fight.

But I was just smiling back at Daniel. I lowered my posture and readied myself.

"Haa~, come at me so I can show you how pointless two blades are."

Daniel held out his long sword and tried to provoke me into attacking, but I remained still.

Once Daniel had grown tired of waiting, he spoke again.

"What's wrong? Aren't you going to attack? If you won't come to me –"

He's going to attack.

In an instant, Daniel switched his focus from defense to attack. I threw the rapier at Daniel the moment he started moving.

"Haaaaa!?"

Daniel was surprised but managed to deflect the rapier. However, I started running towards him the moment I threw the rapier and was now directly in front of him. I thrust my longsword towards his throat.

"...this is my win."

A moment of silence followed.

"No way! This isn't your win! Who the hell throws a sword so suddenly!?"

"Even if you say that, you even said it was a ridiculous idea to fight with two swords."

"Well, why else would you have two!?"

"Obviously, it was to surprise you and get a quick win."

"Don't joke with me! A surprise attack like that isn't allowed!"

"I know you lost but don't embarrass yourself. Isn't it basic knowledge to attack your opponent when their guard is down?"

When your opponent is more skilled than you, you have to take advantage of every opportunity presented to you. This is a basic strategy. Of course, Sophia taught me this.

"Are you an idiot!? I told you to show me the skills necessary to fight against a Lyk Skull Bear! Do you think something like that will work against a bear!?"

"That's...."

"– It would work."

Sophia spoke up for me. When Daniel heard her he turned to face her.

"No, no, no, little girl, there's no chance an attack like that would work against a beast."

"Why not? Animals are intelligent. If they have intelligence, it's possible to exploit that intelligence."

"No, like I said...."

"It would work, wouldn't it?"

"tch...."

Sophia stared blankly at Daniel as he tried to argue.

But she did seem a little angry.... I wonder if that's because Daniel criticized her technique that I used to win. Her cold stare never left Daniel.

When Daniel couldn't take it anymore, he turned back to me with a cold bead of sweat dripping down the side of his face.

"A-A-Anyway, we have to fight again!"

He thrust his finger at me but he seemed a bit reluctant.

Maybe he thinks I'm a coward for using a trick to beat him the first time, but a skilled swordsman shouldn't be defeated by a simple trick. To be honest, I'm a little disappointed by his skill.

Perhaps an adventurer's rank isn't solely determined by their fighting ability.

"Don't you think it's pointless to fight again? A good adventurer should know when he's outmatched."

"Shut up! As if I could leave Remy to a guy that enters a forest dressed like that!"

"Ah...."

Alice is wearing an off-shoulder top and a mini skirt while Sophia is wearing a gothic dress. I'm wearing something that could be called casual wear. We definitely look out of place in a forest.

As I was thinking this, the roar of a Garu Bear echoed out through the forest — except, this roar was different, more powerful.

"J-Just now, that was the roar of a Lyk Skull Bear! I remember hearing one when I was a child!"

Remy screamed out in terror. The moment Sophia heard this she ran in the direction of the roar.

"—Sophia!?"

I tried to run after her but Alice grabbed my arm.

"I'll go after her. Leon, you need to bring everyone else and protect them."

Alice ran after Sophia.

It's difficult for me not to follow, but I realize Alice has heightened senses. I decided to let Alice follow after Sophia and the Lyk Skull Bear.

However, we can't afford to relax.

"Remy, we have to go after them. Can you run?"

"Y-Yes.... I'll be fine."

The fear caused by that roar had a terrible effect on her. She said she's okay but I doubt it. It might take her some time to recover.

What should I do — Daniel then stepped forward as Remy's guard.

"You go after those girls. I'll stay back and protect Remy. We'll catch up with you."

I'm worried about Alice and Sophia and Daniel seems capable enough.... I looked at Remy to see if she was okay with this.

"Please, don't worry about me. I'll catch up with you soon!"

"...all right. I'll go ahead, catch up with us when you can. I'll leave a trail — nevermind, we won't need one."

There's a clear path that Alice has left through the forest. She didn't hesitate to clear anything in her way as she chased after Sophia.

I ran down Alice's path. I couldn't get over how surreal it was seeing a road with no trees or plants going through the forest. I said this before but Alice really didn't hold back.

While thinking she didn't show any self-restraint, as usual, I followed down her path. After a couple minutes, I spotted Alice and Sophia in a small clearing.

And, there was a Lyk Skull Bear.

A gargantuan Garu Bear with a golden coat lying motionless on the ground. This was my first time seeing one, but the golden fur was a dead giveaway.

But, Alice was off to the side. Max and Melissa were standing over the bear.

Is it...dead?

I want that to be the case but it doesn't look like the bear has been hurt. I'm guessing Max managed to capture it.

That means...we won't be able to get the liver. I was scared to look at Sophia.

Sophia was trembling and looking down at the ground. Alice was hugging her in an attempt to calm her down.

I want to comfort her as well, but I know there are things I need to do first. I walked over to Max.

"Yo, I didn't expect to see you here. You actually entered the forest."

Max saw me approaching and gave a slight wave.

"Yeah, but it looks like we were a bit late."

"Yep. It's unfortunate for you but we managed to catch it alive."

"Looks like it. But how are you planning on bringing such a large creature back?"

"It won't be a problem. We have this."

Max took out a large collar big enough to fit around the bear's neck.

The collar was engraved with symbols similar to those used to bind slaves to a slave contract. I don't know how powerful the effect will be but it seems it's strong enough to return the bear back to town.

"...hey, I'll ask you once more, would you be willing to give up the Lyk Skull Bear?"

"Didn't I tell you before? We can't do that."

"Would a thousand gold coins change your mind?"

"Oi, oi, a thousand gold.... Are you serious?"

Max and Melissa were lost for words after hearing my offer. But this reaction isn't unwarranted. A commoner that's well off could live on a salary of five gold coins, so this is two hundred times that amount.

To be honest, I don't want to use money to solve all of my problems, but if I miss out on this chance, we may not have another.

If we had time, we could wait until another Lyk Skull Bear is found, but based on the letter Claire sent me, it's unlikely Elyse will be able to live that long.

— Whatever happens with the Lyk Skull Bear here, decides whether Elyse will live or die.

"If you hand over the bear, I'll do everything in my power to repay you. So, will you give us the bear?"

I gave them a deep bow.

"...let me just as you this: why are you so desperate?"

"It's for Sophia, someone I consider dear to me.... We need the liver to save

her mother."

"You're trying to save someone...?"

Max appeared troubled after hearing my words, but after exchanging a silent glance with Melissa, he turned back to face me....

"...I'm sorry, but we really can't."

A few brief words were all it took to crush any hope I had left.

"...why? Do you think I can't pay that much?"

"That's not what I'm saying. I can tell you have money just by look at your clothes."

"Then why refuse? I was told you're trying to buy back your family members. Wouldn't a thousand gold be enough to do that?"

"Yes, if we had a thousand gold, we'd be able to buy back all of them. I'd be lying if I said your offer isn't tempting...."

"Then why...."

"We already told you, this was a request from our benefactor. He saved our father. Even if you offered us thousands of gold, we'd have to decline."

"I see...."

In the back of my mind, I thought I could get anything I wanted with enough money. I never thought they'd decline.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"...what do you mean?"

"You won't be able to get the liver now. So...are you going to give up? Or...are you going to kill us and take it? There would be no witnesses."

Why would I ever do that — but I couldn't say that. There are no other options left to save Elyse.

This is the only choice if I want to get the liver. I have to decide if I'm willing to commit a crime to save Elyse or allow her to die.

So —

I was staring at Sophia, wondering what I should do. The next moment, Sophia was stabbing Max with a dagger. This was the future I was predicting if Sophia got desperate.

Fortunately, Sophia was remaining silent in Alice's arms. For now, it seems that Sophia isn't going to attack.

...I promised Sophia that I'd save her mother. I stand by my promises.

I promised to save Elyse and even though I have a chance to do that, I'm hesitating.... It's as good as breaking my promise.... Sophia will surely hate me.

What's the right answer?

After thinking it over, I made up my mind.

Chapter 24: A Sorrow like No Other

Without the liver of a Lyk Skull Bear, Elyse will die. However, our one opportunity at getting this liver has been taken by someone else.

What exactly should I do in this situation? I looked back at Max to find my answer.

"I...treasure Sophia with all my heart. I will do anything to protect her."

"Does that mean...you're declaring war against us?"

Max took a few steps away from me and Melissa placed her hand on her weapon.

I shook my head and gave Max a bitter smile.

"If Sophia could find happiness by me committing such an act, I'd gladly do it, but I know that won't be the case.... So I won't attack you."

"...what do you mean?"

"I told you before. I will protect Sophia."

I don't need to kill them to take the liver.

If we kill the bear, they can't bring it to their benefactor alive. Even without resorting to that, I can still use the power available to me as an earl to pressure them into giving us the liver.

There are many other ways for us to get the liver.

However....

We've already gone through so much just to get here and there's always the possibility the liver escapes our grasp again.

I'm worried that Sophia will blame herself. And I can say from personal experience, that nothing is as horrible as losing a parent.

After all...Sophia killed her father for me.

Of course, this led to things improving for us overall. However, if I had handled things better, she never would've had to do that.

Sophia was the one forced to carry such a heavy burden....

I regret ever involving Sophia in that matter. Even though I've gotten past the heartache I felt back then, the guilt has yet to completely disappear.

I don't want Sophia to experience that sorrow ever again.

— So, I may have to break my promise with Sophia.

It may make her sad and she may call me a liar, but I know that will be better than having Sophia do something she'll regret.

"I promise I won't harm you."

"...that's nice, as long as it's true."

Max, who had been silently watching me, slowly removed his hand from his weapon.

"Of course it's true. Besides, we have them with us."

I pointed in the direction we came from. Remy and Daniel were approaching us.

Daniel.... Well, Remy trusted me and joined as our guide. I can't betray that trust.

"Remy...and Daniel? Did he really take up your request?"

"No, we just happened to meet him in the forest."

"Hmm. Well, this must mean you really won't harm us."

"Of course we won't.... Though, I realize you won't believe me just like that, so we'll be leaving."

I said this and turned away from Max and walked to Sophia.

"...Sophia, I'm sorry."

I'm not going to make up any excuses. I gave up when I could've saved Elyse. I bowed my head deeply and waited for Sophia to speak.

"...Leon onii-chan, raise your head."

The words that left her mouth were little more than a faint whisper. I lifted my head, afraid of what I might see. Sophia's face was filled with anguish.

"Leon onii-chan...this is terrible."

"...I'm sorry."

I have no excuses. All I can do is apologize. However, Sophia shook her head as if that's wasn't what she meant.

"I'm not a child anymore."

The words that left her mouth weren't what I was expecting. Why is she saying something like that now...? I was left confused by her words.

"Umm...I understand that."

"You don't understand and that's why I'm angry!"

I was left speechless as Sophia suddenly yelled at me.

"...of course, I want to save my mother! But I would never want you to kill someone to save her. I'd never blame you, onii-chan!"

"Sophia...."

I was finally able to understand what she was saying.

Sophia knew what I was considering doing and she was angry that I thought she'd hate me if I didn't do it.

"...sorry, Sophia."

"Good. I'm glad you understand. Besides, I was the one that didn't make it in time."

"That's...."

It's likely that the roar we heard earlier came out when Melissa confronted it. Therefore, none of us could have got here in time.

So, it's not Sophia's fault.... However, I'm not sure that will comfort her, so I didn't say anything.

Instead, I came up with another plan.

"Sophia, let's continue our search for a Lyk Skull Bear."

"Eh? What do you mean? The Lyk Skull Bear spotted in the forest has already been captured."

"It's too early for us to give up."

When I was locked away outside the Grances mansion, there were many times I could have given up. I never did and that's what got me here.

Even if this creature is rare and one is only spotted every few years, there's always a chance another can be found. If we don't give up, we can still find one.

"It's just like Leon said. It's too early for us to give up. I'll cut down this entire forest to find another bear."

"Aren't elves supposed to protect nature?"

"I don't see a problem if it's for Sophia."

"...I guess so."

If it means protecting Sophia's happiness, I'd happily cut down an entire forest or two. We'll rush through the forest, cutting down everything we come across until we find that bear.

I might have to pay Crane a substantial amount of reparations but.... Who cares? If I don't spend money in a situation like this, what's the point in having it?

"We're not going to give up! We're going to search this entire forest until we find that bear!"

"""Yeah!"""

"Oi, oi, I can tell you're all motivated, but we haven't finished speaking yet."

I turned around to see Max standing there.

"...what do you mean?"

"As we told you before, we'll bring this bear to the client as a favour for what he's done for us, but that doesn't mean you still can't get the liver. I'll mention to him that you are in need of the liver."

"That's greatly appreciated, but...is that okay?"

I was surprised to hear an offer like that from Max. I thought there'd be no

room for negotiation considering they declined a thousand gold.

“Don’t get me wrong. I just said I’ll mention it, the rest is up to you.”

“I know that...but you don’t stand to gain anything, do you?”

“I told you, we’re doing this to repay our benefactor. It could also be good for our benefactor if he meets with you.”

“That’s....”

Is he trying to say I should offer his client the thousand gold?

If their client refuses my offer, Max will be able to tell if I’m trustworthy based on how I react.

“...unless you plan on attacking our benefactor.”

“Did you read my mind?”

“No, it was just a guess.”

I’m not sure what the right choice is. However, meeting this benefactor could be the only way we get a liver.

“By the way, what would you have done if I actually attacked?”

“I was worried about that, but I had a feeling you weren’t that type.”

“Why would you think that?”

“I can just tell. I’m a good judge of character I guess.”

“...I see.”

Why does this guy believe in me when moments ago I was considering attacking them? I’m desperate to protect someone I care about, but for me to consider that.... I’m not a good guy.

Well, I don’t want to miss out on an opportunity to negotiate with their benefactor so I’m not going to argue.

“However...I’ll tell you again that our client wants this bear alive. It’s unlikely that you’ll get the liver you want.”

"Yeah, I understand that."

"Then, we'll return to town and report our success. I'll tell our benefactor about you.... What will you be doing?"

"Oh...if you're going to tell your client about us, we'll return as well."

"If so, why don't you come with us."

"Sure, that sounds good."

Obtaining the liver was temporarily put on hold and we decided to return to town together. It's slim but there is still hope remaining.

By the way —

Eh, wha—? There are buildings in the forest!?"

"Is this a bath!?"

Max and Melissa were amazed by our magic on the trip back home.

Chapter 25: Sophia's Thoughts

Max told us it would take around a week to contact their client. We decided to spend the next few days impatiently waiting in Crane's mansion.

However, I didn't waste this free time during the wait. First off, I decided to write Claire a letter.

Among other things, I asked her to begin a search for a new Lyk Skull Bear. I also sent this same request to Crown Prince Alberto and Akane.

I'd also like to ask her to look into Max and Melissa's client, but it will take time to send letters back and forth. I won't have any time to get information about their client.

Instead, I decided to ask Crane to look into the matter.

I don't plan on putting any pressure on their client, but it would help if I knew his identity before we met. If I know this much, I may be able to find something he needs and offer it to him in exchange for the liver.

After doing everything I could think of to give us the best chance possible of getting the liver, I finally had was able to take a break. I was walking down a hallway to speak with Sophia when I spotted a young girl.

She appeared to be around ten years old. She was a fragile looking girl with jet black hair that came down to her waist. When she noticed me, she timidly kept glancing between me and the floor.

She's a really cute girl. I wonder if she's one of Crane's potential mistresses.

I looked down from her face and saw that her body looked rather small for her age.

"...a-are you L-Leon-sama?"

"Yes, I am...and you are?"

"I'm, umm, well...M-Maya."

...Maya? I'm surprised to meet someone with a Japanese name here. Well, Akane is the same. Surrounding countries seem to use Japanese names, but is

this girl from one of those countries?

"Umm...my name was...given to me by my father."

"Well, it's a nice name. I think it's a perfect name for you."

Maya — as in midnight. That must just be a coincidence since no word like that exists in this world, but it's perfect for a girl with hair as black as hers.

"Hau~...!? Thank you...very much, Leon...sama."

Did I embarrass her? Her face turned bright red and she started looking at the floor. She's like an extremely innocent girl. Her shyness is cute.

"So, Maya, is there something I can do for you?"

"Ah, that's, well.... I just wanted to thank you."

"...thank me? For what?"

"Umm, my hair. It's become very beautiful...."

"Are you talking about the shampoo and conditioner."

"That's...right."

Essentially, she's grateful to me for introducing this world to shampoo and conditioner. Prior to this, most of this world's residents had dried out hair.

"I see. Well, you don't need to thank me for that. Is that all you wanted to say?"

"Ah, umm...there's one more thing. Leon-sama, you're rapidly increasing your sisters-in-law, right?"

"...I wouldn't say that's exactly right."

"Really?"

"Yeah, there are many reasons for that. It's true that the number of my sisters has increased, but it's not as if I've been trying to increase the number."

"Is that so...."

"Y-Yeah."

She looked sad.

"That's how it is...."

Why does she look so lonely!?

"Umm...did I say something wrong?"

"No, it's...nothing like that."

"A-Are you sure?"

"Yes. Then, I'll...be on my way."

Maya said this and took off down the hallway. I don't really know what just happened, but she left me feeling a little guilty....

W-What was that about?

...w-well, nothing I can do about it now. While still thinking about what just happened with Maya, I hurried to Sophia's room.

"...Leon onii-chan, what's wrong?"

"Ah, that's, well...."

"Okay.... Did you want to come in?"

"Sounds good."

I followed Sophia into her room. She took a seat on the bed so I sat next to her.

"So what are you doing here so late at night? Are you finally ready to do that? You don't have to worry about me. I'm always ready."

"No, no, that's not it. I was worried about you."

Before she could say any more, I quickly ended any thoughts she may have had of doing anything like that. I thought she'd be depressed...but if she's capable of joking like that, she may not be as bad as I expected.

Or is she just a good actor?

"...I'm really not forcing myself."

I guess she read my feelings.

But she's probably bluffing. Elyse is still suffering from that disease, and as

things stand, we don't even know if we'll be able to get the final ingredient for her medicine. There's no way she can be calm.

"That's right. Of course, I'm not okay, but I'm trying to remember what Mother told me."

"What Elyse told you?"

Is she talking about when we met Elyse at the Sfir mansion...? But what did Elyse say?

"Mother said that I should focus on taking care of my new family."

Ah...that's what she means.

To me, Elyse is the person that murdered my family. However, she did tell Sophia that it would be rude to me if Sophia tried to maintain a relationship with her.

"I already told you before. Even though she is responsible for my parents' murder, I know she's important to you. You don't have to worry about me."

"...thank you. I know you mean that from the bottom of your heart."

"Then...."

Sophia just silently shook her head.

"I know now after what happened with Max and Melissa, that I don't want you to feel like you have to do whatever it takes to save my mother."

"I see...."

I then remembered our exchange back in the forest.

Sophia told me she didn't want me doing something like that for her and it would make her feel even worse if I did.

Sophia doesn't want me sacrificing my own values and morals to help her.

In other words, Sophia is telling me it isn't necessary for me to save Elyse if it means that I won't suffer.

She's still so worried about her mother but she's still thinking about me.... How hard must it have been for her to make that decision...?

It's nice that she's thinking about me, but I feel sorry that she had to make such a tough decision.

"I received your feelings properly, but it's still too early to give up. I won't commit any crimes to save Elyse, but I will do everything possible to save her."

"That's.... Are you talking about Max and Melissa's client?"

"Yeah, that's right."

We still haven't found out who that is.

There's no guarantee that those negotiations will work out well for us. However, I will use all of the Grances family's power and connections to get that liver.

"...Leon onii-chan...thank you."

"I told you already, you don't have to worry. It's no trouble."

"Even if you say that I still feel that I'm a bother. I'm always asking you for help. Isn't there anything I can do to help you?"

"Something you can do?"

"Yeah, anything. If it's something I can do, I'll do it."

"Hey, a girl shouldn't say stuff like that."

"Ah, that's right. Then...I won't do anything...unless it's with Leon onii-chan."

"...eh?"

What does she mean by that?

"There are people in this world that would use what I just said to steal me away from you. But I hate the idea of doing that kind of stuff with anyone but you. So, I'll only do anything for you."

R-R-Right, that makes sense. Only me. Who taught her something like.... Nevermind, I don't even have to ask. More importantly, I should really change the topic.

"First of all, I'm going to reject that idea."

“Eh!? I didn’t know you had that kind of hobby, Leon onii-chan!”

“That’s not what I’m saying! I’m telling you that you won’t have to do something like that in return.”

“But....”

Sophia seemed uneasy.

Sophia has done a lot to help me. However, I’m not sure she’s aware of that fact.

“If you want to do something for me then, please, smile.”

“...eh? What do you mean?”

“You said you wanted to help me, so you can do that by just smiling.”

“...Leon onii-chan, do you think I’d agree to that?”

That’s strange. That worked on Claire...but I guess back then we were really young.

“...why not, Leon onii-chan? I don’t have any experience, but I have learned plenty. I’m sure I can please you a lot, onii-chan.”

“~~~~~”

What’s with this destructive power? Lines like that coming from the mouth of such a pure and innocent girl.... Is this the final form of gap moe...?

— Calm down. I need to calm down. I’m falling into Sophia’s pace.

“I’m happy that you feel that way, but please wait until you’ve grown a little more.”

In this world, Sophia is considered to be a grown woman that can even get married. It may be wrong of me to use the ethics from my previous world here.

It is true that I don’t want Sophia forcing herself. However, I am tempted by the fact that Sophia has learned a lot of techniques even though she has no experience.

“Fu~, I see....”

Sophia looked at me while smiling. She must have been reading my feelings.

"No, don't misunderstand, okay? As a man it's only natural I'd have certain desires, but it is true that I don't want to put any pressure on you."

"Leon onii-chan, are you sure you believe your own words?"

"This is just making me a little anxious!"

When I think about defiling the pure Sophia, I can't help but get a little disconcerted. I have a strong desire to just give in to this feeling. I'm also starting to notice Sophia more as a woman....

Sophia let out a sweet sigh. I'm unsure whether or not she read my feelings....

"I understand why you feel the way you do, Leon onii-chan. But I'm at an age where I'm interested in doing stuff like that. And it's unfair if you're only doing that stuff with Alice onee-chan."

"Y-You shouldn't say stuff like that...."

"Un~fair~"

"O-Okay. How about this: if Alice agrees to it, you can use your ability to relive her experiences with me."

"– really!?"

"Yeah, I won't go back on what I said. But it's only if Alice agrees, okay?"

"Yeah, I know! Then, I'm going to find Alice onee-chan!"

"S-Sure."

Sophia sprinted out of the room. I only said that out of desperation, but...Alice won't agree, right?

...w-well, Alice doesn't have much common sense, but I'm sure she'd want to keep stuff like that just between us, either due to jealousy or embarrassment. There's no way she'll allow Sophia to use her ability to experience our nights together.

...don't tell me.

Chapter 26: Negotiations with the Client

Today, I had been called to Crane's office

It's been a week since Max said he would speak with his client. Either the meeting has finally been set or Crane has discovered their client's identity.

With this thought in mind, I made my way to his office.

When I arrived, Crane spoke to me with a rather annoyed tone.

"There's something important you need to know about Lady Sophia."

"...eh, what do you mean?"

It didn't have anything to do with Max's client. While being scared to hear the answer, I nervously asked Crane this.

"That's, umm, well.... Several of the staff and others have overheard Lady Sophia's umm...sweet moans coming from Lady Alistair's room."

"...."

No matter how I think about it, this can mean only one thing.

Sophia and Alice, alone in Alice's room together — it could only be that. Sophia used her ability to relive Alice's memories. I told Sophia that if she got Alice's permission, she could relive all of our intimate moments together.

...however, I never expected Alice to agree.

If Sophia uses her ability to do that, she'll experience that memory in an instant. In other words, if Alice's memory lasts an hour, everything she experienced in that time will be transmitted to Sophia at once.

...I wonder if she's okay. I feel like it's too late for me to do anything now. She's basically a small magazine that's had an encyclopedia's worth of knowledge crammed into her.

"Oi, Leon, are you listening?"

"Yeah, sorry, I was just thinking about something."

"Are you okay? I know it's hard to imagine that Lady Alistair is turning you

into a cuckold by stealing Lady Sophia from you, but it's also possible this may just be a misunderstanding."

"...I'm not a cuckold. Well, that may not be entirely true...."

Sophia's partner — the one making her feel good — is essentially Alice's memory or just Alice. I shouldn't think too much about it; it may cause irreparable damage to my heart.

I cleared my throat and told him I'd check in on Sophia.

"Ah, please do.... Now, for the main reason I called you here. I've received news from the Guild that the date for the meeting between that adventurer and his client has been set. You've also been asked to attend."

I let out a sigh of relief when I heard that last line.

If the client wasn't willing to ever sell the liver, they'd never agree to meet with me. There at least seems to be some room for negotiation if they're allowing me to attend.

"When will we be meeting?"

"It seems it will be this afternoon."

"That's a bit sudden."

"The client is in a great hurry."

"...in a hurry? Does that mean you've found out who they are?"

"Yes. I obtained that information earlier today."

"I'd expect nothing less of you."

These were words from the heart, but Crane didn't seem to agree.

"To be honest, it's all thanks to you. If you didn't approach me that day, my territory never would've become so rich...and many of my people would've died."

"No, I think it's all thanks to your efforts, Crane."

Why did he suddenly bring that up? Then, Crane said, "I just wanted you to know how much I appreciate it."

"So, if the client were a merchant or a noble of equal rank, we could have bought the liver by using our combined political power to get them to sell it to us."

"That's...."

I want to get it no matter how hard it may be. It was then that I noticed Crane was speaking in the past tense.

"Are you saying the client is someone that holds a lot of power?"

"...more than you can imagine. To put it into context for you, Crown Prince Alberto would struggle to stand against this person."

"They're that powerful.... Just who could they possibly be?"

"...they're said to be a shadow always watching over Rizelheim. A shadowy figure that runs the country from behind-the-scenes.

An ominous figure that operates in the background.

It thought it may be Patrick, but this person doesn't seem related. Unless Patrick has paid this person.

"Who is this person?"

"That's.... I'm sorry, but I can't say."

Crane bit his lip and turned away. I could even see his shoulder was trembling slightly.

What kind of person could make Crane so scared? I don't know who could possibly have so much power, but I know I should avoid turning them into an enemy.

Fortunately, I'll be meeting this person to talk business. It's entirely possible we can both gain something from this.

"You're sure that this person is willing to negotiate."

"Well, it will really depend on you. I've heard that this person is ruthless to their enemies but quite benevolent to their allies."

Benevolent to their allies? Despite this person being a shadowy figure, they may not be so evil. Well, either way, I have no choice but to meet them.

Later in the day, I went to a cafe for the meeting.

By the way, I came by myself. I didn't think bringing Crane or Sophia was a good idea. Crane is afraid of whoever this client is and it would be bad if the client found out about Sophia's ability.

I'd love to have Sophia with me, but it would be pointless if I ended up making the client angry. And that's why I decided to leave Sophia behind.

Max and Melissa were already waiting for me in the designated private room.

"Sorry, did you wait long?"

"No, we just got here recently. Our client will be here shortly."

"That's good then."

I sat down in the seat closest to the entrance and noticed Max and Melissa were both watching me.

"...what is it?"

"Nothing.... It's just, shouldn't you be sitting at the head of the table?"

"...I don't recall revealing my identity to you."

I know I told Remy but I don't think I told them.

"Oi, oi, what do you expect when you offered us a thousand gold?"

"Ah, right."

There's no chance I'd be a commoner.

But, if that's the case, it seems like they don't think I'm a nobleman. They're probably thinking I'm the son of a wealthy merchant.

If they thought I was a nobleman, they'd probably change the way they speak.

"Today, I'm just here for business. Besides, I don't like it when someone holds their social status over others."

And I'd feel more comfortable if they kept speaking to me more casually.

"Well, I'm not going to complain if you're okay with it. While we wait is there anything you want to know about?"

"Well...."

In order to obtain the liver, I have to be smart in these negotiations. Since Sophia isn't here, I should gather as much information as possible before the client arrives.

I decided to first ask about what type of person their client is.

"You've said that your client is your benefactor, right? What type of person are they?"

I know that he's thought of as the 'Ruler of Shadows' to anyone that really knows who he is, but I wanted to know how they felt.

"Ah, about that, we really don't know much."

"...eh? What do you mean?"

"We told you before. They are our benefactor that saved our fathers. The request we received was actually from Melissa's father, Garrett, on behalf of our benefactor."

Max was the one that answered me. I feel like I've heard that name somewhere before.... Where was it?

"How exactly did this person help your fathers?"

Crane mentioned that this person was merciful to their allies. I asked them this, hoping to understand this person more.

"Our village was abandoned by the Lord during the famine a few years ago. The village was facing certain destruction, so the adults in the village...resorted to thievery."

"So bandits..."

I cocked my head to the side, certain I had heard this story before. However, Max seemed to think that I was reacting negatively to the fact that his father became a bandit. He quickly resumed speaking.

"Of course, I know that that's an unforgivable act. I accepted the fact that my father deserved to be punished and gave up on ever meeting him again."

"That's right. But after a while, our fathers reached out to us and told us they were saved by a nobleman. They were living as criminal slaves, but the noblemen treated them well and they claimed they were living comfortably."

After listening to the two of them tell their story, I was beginning to have little doubt in my mind. The moment I was sure of who this benefactor could be, the door opened.

The person that appeared was someone that shouldn't be there — the true Ruler of Shadows. Somehow...I felt like I was experiencing déjà vu.

The negotiations with the client seemed to have ended before they began.